



## Between Commitment and Constraint: Lecturers' Perceived Readiness for Inclusive Education in Higher Education

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### ABSTRACT

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Inclusive education plays an increasingly important role in higher education as institutions serve more diverse student populations, including students with special educational needs (SEN). While inclusive policies are widely promoted, less is known about how lecturers perceive their readiness to implement inclusive practices in university classrooms, particularly within private higher education contexts. This qualitative case study examined lecturers' perceived readiness for inclusive education through semi-structured interviews with seven lecturers from psychology and education backgrounds who had experience teaching students with SEN. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that lecturers understand readiness as an ongoing, experience-based process developed through teaching practice, reflection, and emotional engagement rather than through formal training. Although participants demonstrated strong commitment to inclusive values and adaptive teaching approaches, many reported uncertainty and reduced confidence due to limited structured professional development and unclear institutional guidance. As a result, readiness was uneven and relied heavily on individual initiative. The study highlights a tension between lecturers' intrinsic motivation to support inclusion and the structural constraints within higher education institutions. It underscores the need for clearer institutional frameworks, targeted professional development, and sustained organisational support to strengthen inclusive teaching practices in higher education.

**Keywords:**

Inclusive education; lecturers' readiness; higher education; inclusive pedagogy; professional development

### 1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become an increasingly important consideration in higher education as universities serve more diverse student populations. The following section provides the background and rationale for examining how lecturers perceive their readiness to implement inclusive education within their classroom contexts.

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### 1.1 Research Background

Inclusive education is about providing equal access to students with special educational needs (SEN) to learn in the general classroom. This approach to education recognises and values the uniqueness of every student, including those with SEN, and is promoted globally by organisations such as UNESCO. UNESCO recognizes inclusive education as a fundamental right in education, stating that inclusive education is an important right for all children and that every child has the right to learn in an inclusive environment that meets their individual learning needs [1].

Educators play a critical role in shaping inclusive classrooms through their attitudes, knowledge as well as willingness to adapt [2]. This directly influences how SEN students experience university learning. SEN is defined as students who are determined by professionals (educators or specialists) to require additional support within learning environments due to certain barriers related to learning, physical, emotional or behavioural challenges [3]. For instance, students with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and others that receive supportive adaptive interventions aimed to improve academic outcomes.

Research finds that lecturers often want to adopt inclusive teaching practices however their lack of confidence and knowledge inhibits their ability [4,5]. Study Márquez *et al.*, [4] demonstrates that lecturers often endorse inclusive education in principle, yet struggle to enact inclusive practices due to limited knowledge, training, and pedagogical capacity, resulting in uneven implementation of inclusive classrooms. Study Olayvar [5] argues that teachers' competencies, including their capacity to support students with special educational needs and prior experience doing so, are more strongly associated with the implementation of inclusive teaching practices than motivation alone. Despite these findings, there remains limited understanding of how lecturers themselves perceive their readiness to implement inclusive education within their own classroom contexts, and the factors behind it.

Within this context, the research problem addressed in this study concerns the disconnect between inclusive education ideals and lecturers' perceived readiness to implement inclusive practices in higher education classrooms. While policies and frameworks increasingly emphasise inclusion, less is known about how lecturers themselves understand and experience readiness for inclusive education, particularly within private higher education settings. Accordingly, this study is guided by the research question: How do lecturers perceive their readiness to implement inclusive education in their classrooms? By examining lecturers' perceptions of readiness, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the personal, professional, and institutional factors that shape inclusive teaching in higher education. The findings are significant in informing professional development initiatives, institutional support structures, and future research aimed at strengthening inclusive education practices in university contexts.

### 1.2 Literature Review

#### 1.2.1 Inclusive education in higher education

Inclusive education refers to teaching approaches, classroom interventions, and institutional policies that deliberately ensure learning opportunities in general education settings are accessible and supported for all students, including those with special educational needs (SEN). Within higher education contexts, inclusive education commonly involves the use of adaptive technologies and personalised learning strategies to support student participation and engagement [6].

In the Malaysian education context, a range of personal and systemic barriers continue to limit the effective implementation of inclusive teaching, with many educators reporting limited

confidence and insufficient preparation to support students with special educational needs [7]. The study Alshoura [7] found that educators often feel unprepared to support students with special educational needs due to the absence of formal training, limited access to specialised resources, and unclear or fragmented support mechanisms. These findings point to a gap between inclusive education principles and lecturers' preparedness to enact inclusive practices, underscoring the importance of examining how lecturers perceive their own readiness to support students with SEN. Understanding lecturers' experiences and perceived needs is therefore critical for improving professional development, informing institutional policies, and fostering learning environments that are more inclusive and equitable for all students [8].

Malaysia's national education agenda, as outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, promotes inclusive education by emphasising the importance of addressing learner diversity across educational settings [9]. Despite this policy emphasis, research in higher education contexts indicates that lecturers frequently feel unprepared to teach students with SEN in their classrooms [10,11]. Studies Ghazali *et al.*, [12] and Faragher *et al.*, [13] suggest that this may be attributed to professional development opportunities that do not adequately address inclusive education, including within higher education contexts. In addition to training-related challenges, institutional constraints and limited organisational support have been identified as further barriers to inclusive teaching [10,14,15]. As a result, students with SEN may experience academic and social exclusion within higher education environments, while lecturers may encounter uncertainty and difficulty in providing meaningful support, highlighting the need for continued research into the factors that hinder lecturers' capacity to accommodate diverse learner needs [16].

### 1.2.2 Lecturer readiness for inclusive education

Lecturer readiness is a multidimensional construct encompassing lecturer's cognitive, operational, and psychological preparedness in implementing inclusive practices [17]. This includes lecturers understanding special educational needs, knowing different ways to accommodate for diverse needs, and being psychologically prepared to manage SEN students. It may also include emotional readiness, confidence, and self-efficacy in supporting students with varied learning needs.

Empirical studies suggest that self-efficacy is a key component of readiness, with higher levels of self-efficacy associated with greater willingness to adopt inclusive practices [18,19,20]. Furthermore, Alnahdi [21] indicates that educators perceived capacity and confidence to implement inclusive approaches shape whether inclusive intentions translate into practice.

However, despite strong policy advocacy for inclusion, research continues to highlight a gap between equity-oriented beliefs and educators perceived readiness to implement inclusive practices in classroom contexts [22]. Hesitation or resistance towards inclusive practices among educators has also been linked to perceptions of increased workload and uncertainty about applying specialised strategies. Even when educators support the principles of inclusion, concerns about additional responsibilities and lack of practical knowledge may discourage implementation [23]. Uncertainty about how to support students with SEN, combined with limited exposure to inclusive teaching approaches, can reduce educators' confidence and openness to inclusion [24]. Research suggests that addressing misconceptions about SEN and strengthening educators' access to appropriate resources and training can enhance readiness and willingness to support inclusive practices [25].

Research indicates that readiness is shaped by multiple factors such as emotional dispositions, beliefs about disability and diversity, personal teaching philosophies, institutional culture, and perceived workload [26,27]. These interacting factors indicate that readiness is not solely an individual attribute but is shaped by both personal and organisational conditions [27]. To support

inclusive teaching effectively, these factors must be addressed through systematic professional development, coherent institutional support, and access to appropriate resources [27]. Continued research is therefore required to develop and refine frameworks that support lecturers' readiness to implement inclusive education within higher education institutions [26,27].

#### *1.2.3 Professional learning and experience-based preparation*

Lecturer readiness is often conceptualised within a limited scope, with many studies assessing readiness primarily through psychological indicators such as attitudes and self-efficacy, rather than through more holistic measures of inclusive practice [28,29]. However, research increasingly suggests that readiness for inclusive education extends beyond awareness or positive attitudes alone. Supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) requires emotional preparedness, including confidence and the capacity to manage ongoing emotional and instructional demands when responding to diverse learning needs over time [30]. It also involves experiential and pedagogical capacity, such as the ability to adapt teaching methods, learning materials, and assessment practices to better support student diversity [31].

A growing body of literature highlights the role of professional learning and experience in shaping educators' readiness for inclusive teaching. Studies have identified limitations in professional development and training opportunities as key factors constraining educators' capacity to support students with SEN [32,33]. Within the Malaysian context, Lyn *et al.*, [33] found that although teachers often express support for inclusive education in principle, their perceived readiness to implement inclusive practices remains low due to limited access to practical training and ongoing professional development. These findings suggest that readiness is frequently developed through practice and experience rather than through initial training alone.

Lecturers' perceptions of readiness are also influenced by individual teaching backgrounds and disciplinary experiences [34]. Research indicates that while gender does not appear to play a significant role in shaping self-efficacy, the confidence of educators varies according to teacher background and experience. For instance, educators with limited experience supporting students with special educational needs have been found to report lower self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices and responding to diverse learner needs [35]. Similarly, another study Wahyuni *et al.*, [36] indicates that educators' confidence is more strongly associated with experiential factors, such as prior interaction with students with disabilities, rather than personal demographics. Discipline-specific differences have also been observed, with lecturers in education- and psychology-related disciplines often demonstrating more student-centred and adaptive approaches than those in more technically oriented disciplines such as engineering or applied sciences [37]. Together, these findings highlight the importance of experience-based learning and contextual exposure in shaping educators' readiness for inclusive education, reinforcing the need to consider professional learning as an ongoing and situated process rather than a one-time intervention.

#### *1.2.4 Institutional structures and support for inclusive teaching*

The gap between inclusive education principles and classroom practice is often widened in the absence of clear institutional guidance [14]. When institutions do not provide explicit frameworks or guidance for inclusive teaching, educators may feel uncertain about how to adapt instructional approaches to meet diverse learner needs. Research indicates that a lack of clarity around inclusive practices can lead educators to rely on improvised and guesswork approaches, which in turn contributes to heightened stress, increased role strain, and reduced confidence in supporting students with SEN [38,39]. For instance, although situated within a COVID-19 context, study

Mthembu *et al.*, [39] found that educators experienced an increased amount of stress and anxiety dealing with SEN students as there was limited psychological and pedagogical support from the schools.

Although there has been increasing ideological support among educators for inclusive education, institutional structures and resources have not always developed at a similar pace. Effective inclusive teaching in higher education requires more than individual commitment; it depends on access to systematic support mechanisms, including assistive technologies, inclusive curriculum planning, and collaborative structures such as team-teaching models or access to specialised SEN support staff [14, 40]. In the absence of these institutional provisions, educators often report feeling overburdened and insufficiently supported, which can undermine their confidence and capacity to deliver inclusive learning experiences for students with SEN. These findings suggest that institutional readiness plays a critical role in shaping lecturers' individual readiness for inclusive teaching, highlighting the need for organisational responsibility alongside individual effort.

#### 1.2.5 Gap in literature

Although inclusive education has received increasing attention in recent years, important gaps remain within the higher education literature, particularly in relation to private universities in Malaysia. Existing research on inclusive education has largely focused on public higher education institutions or on primary and secondary school settings [41,42]. As a result, the experiences of lecturers working in private higher education contexts remain underrepresented. Private universities often operate within distinct administrative structures, serve different student populations, and vary in their access to institutional resources, all of which can influence how inclusive education is understood and enacted in practice. Consequently, findings derived from public or school-based contexts may not fully capture the everyday realities faced by lecturers in private higher education institutions.

A further gap within the literature concerns the tendency to position inclusive education as the responsibility of specialised SEN units rather than as a shared pedagogical responsibility across disciplines. This misconception can result in mainstream lecturers feeling less obligated to develop the competencies required to support diverse learners within inclusive classrooms. Such competencies include differentiated instructional strategies, behavioural management approaches for neurodivergent learners, and foundational knowledge of specific learning disabilities. When inclusive practices are not embedded within lecturers' professional roles, students with SEN may be left without adequate support within mainstream learning environments, as lecturers often lack the necessary resources and knowledge to support these students [43].

In addition, while previous studies have examined educators' attitudes towards inclusive education, there is comparatively limited research that explores lecturers' own perceptions of readiness to implement inclusive practices, particularly within private higher education settings. This gap is significant, as readiness encompasses not only knowledge and skills, but also confidence, emotional preparedness, and access to institutional support, all of which shape inclusive teaching practices. Addressing these gaps, the present study explores how lecturers in Malaysian private universities perceive their readiness to support students with special educational needs (SEN), with particular attention to their professional preparation, experiential learning, and institutional support structures.

## 2. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach used to investigate participants perceived readiness to implement inclusive education in higher education contexts. It describes the research design, participants and research context, data collection methods, and the analytic processes used to interpret participants' accounts of inclusive teaching and support for students with special educational needs.

### 2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how lecturers in a private higher learning institution perceive their readiness to support students with special educational needs (SEN). This method allows for a deeper understanding of lived experiences within natural settings, capturing details that may not be evident through quantitative approaches [44]. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for examining participants' perspectives, beliefs, and professional practices related to inclusive education [44].

### 2.2 Participants

Seven participants were recruited from a Malaysian private higher education institution in Malaysia. All participants held academic qualifications in psychology and/or education and had direct or ongoing experience teaching students with SEN, including through course delivery, lesson planning, or assessment. Participants had a minimum of two years of teaching experience in a higher institution and had worked with students requiring additional support in their classrooms. These criteria were applied to ensure that participants were able to reflect meaningfully on their perceived readiness to implement inclusive education within higher education contexts. The sample size of seven participants was considered appropriate for this qualitative study, as the aim was to obtain in-depth, experience-rich accounts rather than statistical generalisability. In qualitative interview studies, sample adequacy is guided by informational power, whereby smaller samples are sufficient when participants possess relevant experience, and the research aim is focused [45].

### 2.3 Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection. This approach is well suited to qualitative research, as it enables in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews [46]. Semi-structured interviews provided the flexibility to discuss complex topics such as perceived readiness, inclusive pedagogy, and institutional barriers, while still giving participants space to share their views freely.

A set of six open-ended interview questions was developed to address the research question. These questions formed part of a broader interview protocol used in a two-part research study, in which additional questions were included to address a second, related research focus reported in a separate paper. To evaluate the clarity, tone, and structure of the interview questions, a pilot study was conducted with two participants who met the inclusion criteria but were not part of the main study. The purpose of this pilot was to test the feasibility of the interview procedures and the appropriateness of the questions in a real-time setting. Pilot testing is used to evaluate and refine questionnaires, as it helps to identify how and why survey questions may not be understood or answered as intended [47]. The session allowed the researchers to test the suitability of the questions, as well as alter them for this paper.

An interview guide was then developed that asked the interview questions along with optional follow-up prompts that were used flexibly depending on participants' responses. This interview guide was used for the study. For example, one interview question asked, "What does inclusive education mean to you in your teaching context?", with follow-up prompts such as "How did you develop this understanding?" and "Can you describe an example from your experience?" to encourage elaboration. To ensure conceptual clarity and consistency across interviews, key terms such as 'readiness' were briefly explained to participants during the interview when relevant. This was done to ensure that participants' responses reflected a shared understanding of the construct while still allowing space for individual interpretation. Follow-up questions were guided by the interview protocol to support comparability across interviews while preserving the conversational and responsive nature of the semi-structured format.

#### 2.4 Data Analysis

##### *Thematic Analysis*

This study employed thematic analysis as the primary method of data analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach that is commonly used in qualitative data to identify patterns or themes within a dataset [48,49]. Rather than remaining at a descriptive level, thematic analysis enables the exploration of underlying meanings, interpretations, and relationships within the data [48]. Thematic analysis is particularly suited to research questions participants' subjective perspectives and experiences of inclusive education, allowing both explicit and implicit meanings in interview data to be examined [49]. In this study, thematic analysis was guided by an interpretivist perspective, prioritising participants' meanings and interpretations rather than treating the data as objective facts. Given the open-ended nature of the interview questions, thematic analysis allowed the researchers to attend to both descriptive and interpretive aspects of participants' accounts [50].

##### *Coding Process*

The coding process began with familiarisation with the interview transcripts, after which data were analysed using thematic analysis. Initial coding was conducted to identify meaningful segments relevant to the research question, with coding undertaken iteratively using both inductive and deductive approaches. Inductive coding allowed patterns to emerge from participants' accounts, while deductive coding was informed by concepts related to inclusive education and readiness identified in existing literature. Related codes were then reviewed and clustered to identify broader patterns of meaning, which informed the development of preliminary themes. These themes were refined through an iterative process that involved reviewing internal coherence within themes and ensuring consistency across the overall dataset [48]. Where necessary, themes were merged, refined, or separated to enhance analytic clarity. Once finalised, each theme was clearly defined and named to capture its central meaning and contribution to understanding participants' perceived readiness for inclusive education. The resulting themes formed the basis of the Findings and Discussion section, where participants' accounts were interpreted in relation to existing research.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from the thematic analysis of the interview data. The analysis identified four interrelated themes that illuminate how participants perceive and enact readiness for inclusive education within higher education contexts. These themes capture participants' experiences of developing readiness over time, the emotional and reflexive

dimensions of inclusive teaching, the role of individual agency in adapting practice, and the structural and institutional conditions that shape inclusive readiness. Together, the themes are presented using illustrative participant quotations and are discussed in relation to existing literature to provide a nuanced understanding of inclusive readiness as both individually enacted and institutionally situated.

### 3.1 Readiness as an Evolving, Experience-Based Construct

Participants commonly described readiness for inclusive education as professional preparedness that is developed gradually through experience rather than as a skill acquired through formal training. Instead of feeling “ready” from the outset, participants spoke about learning how to support students over time by responding to real classroom situations. One participant explained that “that’s a skill I honed over the years... what I feel is what I give to them. I put myself in their shoes” (P1), highlighting how readiness was built through empathy and repeated practice. Another participant similarly shared that “experience helps you become more alert to what the student might need” (P5), suggesting that readiness emerged as participants became more sensitive to students’ individual needs through ongoing interaction.

For many participants, readiness only began to take shape after encountering students who required additional support, particularly in the absence of clear institutional guidance. Several described initial uncertainties about how best to respond, noting that they learned largely through trial, reflection, and adjustment. One participant reflected, “I think I became ready when I realised how much students needed understanding and flexibility. Before that, I didn’t know how to help, but I kept learning” (P6). This experience was echoed by another participant who noted that their readiness “comes naturally” and was “influenced [and] developed over experience but has no formal training” (P4). Together, these accounts suggest that readiness was shaped more by doing and adapting than by formal preparation.

Taken together, these accounts present readiness as a relational and ongoing process that develops through experience, reflection, and changing circumstances, rather than a fixed outcome of institutional training, leaving open important connections with how lecturer readiness has been discussed and understood within existing higher education and inclusive education literature. This experience-based construction of readiness is consistent with prior research in higher education contexts, which has shown that educators’ preparedness for inclusive teaching often develops through sustained engagement with students rather than through formalised training alone. Studies in Malaysian higher education have reported that lecturers frequently rely on informal learning, reflective practice, and accumulated teaching experience when supporting students with special educational needs, particularly in the absence of structured institutional guidance [11,12]. International and regional research has further highlighted that readiness is commonly shaped through relational encounters and personal meaning-making, with educators learning “on the job” as they navigate diverse learner needs [11,17]. From an inclusive pedagogy perspective, readiness is therefore not understood as a fixed competency, but as an evolving process that develops through interaction, reflection, and responsiveness to learners [17]. Viewed in this way, the participants’ accounts extend existing literature by illustrating how readiness emerges as a dynamic, experience-driven construct that is embedded in both professional practice and personal development within higher education contexts.

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### ***3.2 Emotional Labour, Reflexivity, and Inclusive Teaching***

Participants described inclusive teaching as emotionally demanding work that required constant self-monitoring, empathy, and emotional regulation, particularly when supporting students with complex or less visible needs. Several participants spoke about the weight of responsibility they felt when students disclosed personal or academic struggles, particularly in the absence of clear boundaries or guidance from the institution. One participant shared that students sometimes confide deeply, noting that “they tell you things that are quite heavy, and you’re not always sure how much you’re supposed to step in” (P2). Another participant reflected on the emotional strain of wanting to help while feeling uncertain about the limits of their role, explaining, “You care, but sometimes you question whether what you’re doing is enough, or even the right thing” (P6). These accounts highlight how inclusive teaching involved emotional labour that extended beyond instructional decision-making.

In the absence of formal structures, participants often relied on reflexive practice to navigate these emotional demands. Reflection was described as a necessary tool for making sense of difficult interactions and for coping with feelings of doubt or inadequacy. One participant explained, “I usually reflect after a semester ends, like what worked, what didn’t, what I could’ve done differently” (P6), indicating that reflexivity was an ongoing and deliberate process. Another participant similarly noted that reflection helped them recalibrate their expectations and responses, stating, “Sometimes I realise only after that maybe I could have approached the student differently” (P4). These reflective practices allowed participants to process emotional experiences and adapt their teaching approaches, even when immediate answers were not available.

Personal identity and life experiences further shaped how participants understood and managed the emotional dimensions of inclusive teaching. Some participants described how changes in their personal lives altered their emotional responses to students. One participant reflected, “Being a parent made me more aware of how vulnerable some students can be” (P3), while another noted that experience outside formal teaching contexts influenced their sensitivity, stating, “Over time, you become more aware, not just academically, but emotionally” (P5).

These reflections suggest that emotional labour and reflexivity were closely intertwined, shaping how participants interpreted their responsibilities and sustained their commitment to inclusive teaching, leaving open important links to how emotional labour, reflexivity, and professional identity are discussed within the wider inclusive education literature. This emphasis on emotional labour and reflexive practice aligns with existing research that highlights the affective demands placed on educators engaged in inclusive teaching. Foundational work has long highlighted that inclusive teaching can involve managing complex emotional interactions, particularly when supporting students with less visible or undisclosed needs, which may heighten educators’ sense of emotional responsibility and self-scrutiny [51]. More recent research in higher education contexts has further indicated that reflexivity functions as a key coping and learning mechanism, enabling educators to interpret emotionally challenging encounters and recalibrate their professional responses over time [16]. From a professional identity perspective, emotional labour and reflexive engagement are therefore central to how educators sustain commitment to inclusive teaching in the absence of clear structural support [17]. Viewed in this way, the participants’ accounts extend existing literature by illustrating how emotional work and reflexivity are not peripheral, but foundational to inclusive readiness in higher education.

### 3.3 Individual Agency and Adaptive Inclusive Practices

Participants described inclusive readiness as being enacted primarily through individual agency, with inclusive practices often emerging from self-initiated adaptation rather than formalised institutional direction. In the absence of structured guidance, participants relied on their own judgement to modify teaching approaches in response to students' needs. One participant explained that inclusion frequently required improvisation and personal initiative, noting that "when we explain it to them and we need to go one-to-one, it cannot be done in the group, somehow you need to go one-to-one and guide them necessary" (P7). Similarly, another participant emphasised that inclusive teaching often depended on recognising the limitations of standard classroom practices and responding flexibly, stating that "most of the strategies or new initiatives must come from the bottom up... we leave it to the lecturers to make certain decisions about what strategies to best implement in their classroom for their modules, for their students" (P2). These accounts highlight how inclusive practice was shaped by situational awareness and individual responsiveness rather than prescribed pedagogical frameworks.

Participants also described adaptive thinking through their consideration of alternative tools and resources to support communication and engagement. Several emphasised the importance of tailoring learning environments to student needs, particularly when conventional systems were perceived as insufficient or limiting. One participant reflected on the potential role of assistive technologies, explaining that "those who cannot speak, those who have autism, those who have communication issues... maybe we could have one technology so that they can use that device in order to make the communication become more effective" (P7). Another participant similarly highlighted perceived gaps in existing learning platforms, noting that "in the learning platform, like LMS... they should integrate all these new technologies or anything that can support students with autism or any spectrum of the students" (P6). Rather than describing fully implemented strategies, these accounts reflect participants' recognition of structural limitations and their emerging ideas about how inclusive support could be strengthened through more responsive technological and pedagogical resources.

Despite demonstrating strong commitment and creativity, participants were also aware that reliance on individual initiative created uneven inclusive experiences for students. Several expressed concern that without shared structures, inclusive practices depended heavily on personal exposure, confidence, and willingness to act. One participant noted that inclusive teaching often stemmed from personal values rather than systemic support, stating that "training becomes an asset... but I don't think I've ever received or even come across any training for lecturers to include when you have students with special needs" (P5). Another participant echoed this reliance on personal motivation, explaining that "if we can have a targeted or specialised workshop... that would be a good initiative, but until then, we just do what we can" (P4).

These reflections suggest that while individual agency enabled adaptive responses to students' needs, it also introduced inconsistencies that raise broader questions about equity and sustainability in inclusive higher education practices. This emphasis on individual agency and adaptive practice reflects wider research suggesting that inclusive teaching in higher education is frequently sustained through educators' personal initiative rather than through coordinated institutional frameworks. Previous studies have shown that, in the absence of clear guidance, educators often develop context-specific strategies based on professional judgement, experiential knowledge, and perceived student needs, resulting in highly individualised approaches to inclusion [16]. While such agentic responses can enable flexible and responsive teaching, research has also cautioned that reliance on individual discretion may contribute to uneven inclusive provision across courses and contexts, particularly

where access to training and resources varies [8]. Viewed through this lens, the participants' accounts extend existing literature by illustrating how individual agency functions both as a resource for inclusive practice and as a potential source of inconsistency when institutional structures remain underdeveloped.

### **3.4 Structural and Institutional Constraints on Inclusive Readiness**

Participants described institutional expectations for inclusion as largely implicit, with limited formal structures to guide or support inclusive teaching. Several noted that while inclusion was encouraged in principle, there was little clarity about how it should be enacted in practice. One participant reflected that "we are expected to support them, but there isn't a very clear process on what to do or who to go to" (P1), while another explained that "sometimes you only realise there is a problem when it happens, and then you try to figure it out on your own" (P3). These accounts suggest that readiness was shaped within an environment where responsibility was present, but guidance was diffuse.

A recurring concern across participants was the absence of targeted professional development related to inclusive education. Participants emphasised that opportunities to build skills that promote inclusivity in their classrooms were limited and often informal, relying on personal initiative rather than institutional planning. One participant noted that "if we can have a targeted or specialised workshop, especially for lecturers, that would really help" (P4), while another stated that "most of what I know came from my own reading and experience, not from training provided by the institution" (P2). This lack of structured learning opportunities constrained participants' ability to develop readiness in a consistent or collective manner.

Participants also highlighted gaps in coordination and resource allocation that limited their capacity to respond effectively to students' needs. Several pointed to the absence of dedicated systems or clearly identified support mechanisms, noting that inclusive efforts often depended on individual awareness rather than an institution-wide design to handle inclusivity in classrooms. One participant remarked that "support exists, but it's not always obvious how to access it or whether it applies to your situation" (P6), while another explained that implementing inclusive practices "it really depends on the lecturer and the module, there's no standard way of doing things" (P5). These reflections underscore how structural ambiguity contributed to uneven readiness across contexts and teaching environments.

Taken together, participants' accounts reveal that inclusive readiness was shaped not only by personal commitment and experience, but also by the broader institutional conditions within which teaching occurred. While participants demonstrated willingness to adapt and support students, limited guidance, fragmented training opportunities, and unclear support structures constrained the extent to which readiness could be developed systematically.

These constraints suggest that inclusive readiness cannot be understood solely as an individual responsibility, but must be examined in relation to institutional practices, policies, and resourcing, opening further discussion on how structural conditions shape inclusive education in higher education. These structural constraints reflect patterns widely documented in inclusive education research, which emphasises that institutional commitment to inclusion is often expressed rhetorically while practical guidance, resourcing, and professional learning remain underdeveloped. Studies in higher education have consistently shown that when inclusive policies are not accompanied by clear implementation frameworks, responsibility for inclusion is displaced onto individual educators, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent practices [8]. International research similarly highlights that the absence of coordinated institutional support limits educators' capacity to

develop inclusive readiness collectively, reinforcing reliance on informal strategies and personal initiative [15]. From an inclusive pedagogy perspective, sustainable inclusive practice requires systemic alignment across policy, professional development, and organisational structures rather than reliance on individual goodwill alone [17]. Viewed in this way, the participants' accounts extend existing literature by illustrating how institutional conditions actively shape, constrain, and distribute responsibility for inclusive readiness within higher education contexts.

While this study foregrounds experience-based learning and institutional conditions, other factors may also shape lecturers' perceived readiness for inclusive education. Disciplinary culture, prior professional training, and individual teaching philosophies have been shown to influence educators' pedagogical orientations and confidence in inclusive practice. However, in this study, participants across psychology and education backgrounds consistently described readiness as emerging through lived classroom experience rather than formal disciplinary training alone, suggesting that institutional conditions and experiential learning played a more immediate role in shaping readiness within this context.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study examined how lecturers perceive their readiness to implement inclusive education within higher education classrooms in a Malaysian private university context. The findings indicate that readiness is not experienced as a fixed or formally acquired state, but as an evolving, experience-based process shaped through teaching practice, emotional labour, and reflexive learning. Participants demonstrated strong commitment to inclusive values and described adaptive responses to students' needs; however, their readiness was largely developed informally and relied heavily on individual judgement and self-directed learning rather than structured institutional preparation.

Importantly, the findings reveal a tension between lecturers' intrinsic motivation to support inclusive education and the structural conditions within which they work. In the absence of clear institutional frameworks, targeted professional development, and coordinated support mechanisms, inclusive practices were enacted unevenly across teaching contexts. While individual agency enabled flexible and responsive approaches, reliance on personal initiative alone raises concerns about consistency, equity, and the long-term sustainability of inclusive education in higher education. While individual agency enables responsive and compassionate inclusive practice, the findings indicate that primary responsibility for sustaining inclusive readiness must lie at the institutional level, particularly in providing clear frameworks, training pathways, and coordinated support structures that reduce reliance on individual goodwill alone. Such support may include explicit inclusive education policies, access to targeted professional development and mentoring, reasonable workload recognition for inclusive teaching efforts, and clearer referral pathways for supporting students with special educational needs.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The small sample drawn from a single Malaysian private higher education institution limits the transferability of the findings to comparable contexts. The study relied on self-reported perceptions rather than direct observation of classroom practice, and its cross-sectional design does not capture how readiness may develop over time or in response to institutional interventions. In addition, the absence of comparative perspectives across public and private institutions constrains broader contextual interpretation.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal studies that examine how lecturers' perceived readiness evolves over time, particularly following the introduction of structured institutional support or professional development initiatives, as this would offer the strongest theoretical insight into readiness as a developmental process. Comparative research across public and private higher

education institutions represents a secondary but valuable avenue for understanding how governance and resourcing shape inclusive readiness. Further exploratory work may also examine how disciplinary cultures and teaching philosophies interact with institutional conditions to influence inclusive practice.

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