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THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY LECTURERS IN ENHANCING INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR BLACK NEURODIVERGENT FEMALE STUDENTS WITH ADHD

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Abstract
Inclusive higher education remains a critical yet underexplored area, particularly at the intersection of race, gender, and neurodiversity. Black neurodivergent female students with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) face compounded barriers, including attention and executive functioning challenges, coupled with experiences of racialised and gendered biases. This study aimed to explore how university lecturers contribute to enhancing inclusive learning environments for this student population. Employing a qualitative research design, the study relied on purposive sampling to select 15 lecturers from diverse faculties with direct engagement with neurodivergent students. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Findings revealed five key roles of lecturers in fostering inclusivity: pedagogical, emotional and relational, advocacy and support, culturally responsive, and reflective and developmental. Lecturers adopted flexible, multimodal teaching strategies, demonstrated empathy and relational engagement, advocated for access to institutional resources, embedded cultural responsiveness in pedagogy, and engaged in continuous professional reflection. These strategies collectively supported the academic, emotional, and social inclusion of Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. The study recommends institutionalising inclusive pedagogical practices, prioritising emotional and relational teaching, formalising lecturer advocacy structures, promoting culturally responsive pedagogy, and fostering continuous reflection and professional development. The study concludes that effective inclusion requires collaborative, whole-institution approaches, where lecturers act as educators and advocates, ensuring equitable access and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: ***ADHD, Black female students, culturally responsive teaching, higher education, inclusive education, lecturer advocacy, neurodiversity***

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions globally are increasingly recognising the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that accommodate the diverse cognitive, cultural, and emotional needs of all students. However, the intersection of race, gender, and neurodiversity remains an underexplored dimension of inclusivity (Gottardello et al., 202). Neurodivergent students, such as those with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), often experience significant barriers in academic settings, including difficulties with attention regulation, executive functioning, and emotional control (Giannakopoulos, 2025). For Black neurodivergent female students, these challenges are further compounded by experiences of racialised and gendered biases, which can manifest as misinterpretations of behaviour, microaggressions, and limited institutional understanding of their lived realities (Stephens, 2022). Within university contexts, lecturers play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive learning environments through their pedagogical choices, emotional awareness, advocacy, and cultural responsiveness (Woodcock & Anderson, 2025). Inclusive education frameworks, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), emphasise flexibility in teaching, representation, and assessment to accommodate diverse learning needs. Yet, in many higher education institutions, particularly in African contexts, pedagogical practices remain rooted in standardised, lecture-based methods that privilege neurotypical modes of learning (Walton & Osman, 2022). This creates systemic disadvantages for students whose learning styles differ from institutional norms, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the demand for inclusive, technology-enabled education is even greater. The integration of digital tools and multimodal teaching methods offers opportunities to address accessibility gaps while promoting innovative learning (Fitzgerald & Evans, 2024). However, without culturally and emotionally responsive lecturers who understand intersectional neurodiversity, such advancements risk reproducing exclusion rather than alleviating it (Fielding et al., 2025). This study, therefore, situates the role of lecturers at the centre of the inclusivity discourse, focusing on how they can design and sustain learning environments that are equitable, responsive, and empowering for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD.

Although inclusion has become a central tenet of higher education policy and discourse, its implementation often overlooks intersectional neurodiversity, the unique experiences of students who navigate multiple forms of marginalisation simultaneously (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Existing literature on inclusive pedagogy has largely focused on general disability inclusion or neurodivergence as a singular construct, without sufficient attention to how race and gender intersect with ADHD to influence students' educational experiences (Earnest & Crowley, 2025; Leifler et al., 2024). As a result, Black neurodivergent female students often encounter invisibility within support structures, misinterpretation of ADHD-related behaviours as defiance or incompetence, and emotional alienation within academic spaces. Lecturers, as the primary facilitators of learning, are key actors in either reinforcing or dismantling these barriers. However, limited research has explored how lecturers perceive and enact their roles in supporting such students, particularly within African universities where the legacy of exclusion and deficit-based education models persists. Consequently, there remains a disjuncture between inclusive education policy rhetoric and the lived realities of students with intersecting identities of race, gender, and neurodivergence. The central problem addressed in this study, therefore, is the lack of understanding of how university lecturers contribute to enhancing inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD and what practices or attitudes facilitate or hinder such inclusion.

While global scholarship on neurodiversity in higher education is expanding, most studies have focused on Western contexts, often neglecting the African higher education landscape (Elsherif et al., 2022; Harrison & Mosen, 2025). There is a paucity of research exploring how Black female students with ADHD experience learning environments within universities, and even fewer studies examining the role of lecturers in shaping those experiences. Moreover, existing studies on inclusive pedagogy seldom integrate an intersectional framework that accounts for the simultaneous influence of race, gender, and neurodivergence (Maurel, 2023; Wolbring & Nasir, 2024). This gap is particularly significant in South African and broader African contexts, where historical inequities, colonial legacies, and standardised teaching practices continue to shape academic cultures. The limited exploration of lecturers' pedagogical, emotional, and cultural roles in fostering inclusive learning for neurodivergent Black women creates a critical knowledge vacuum. Addressing this gap is essential for developing a more contextually relevant and socially just understanding of inclusion in higher education.

The rationale for this study stems from the urgent need to reconceptualise inclusion in higher education as an intersectional and relational practice rather than a procedural or policy-driven

goal. Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD occupy a complex social and academic position, often contending with racial bias, gender stereotypes, and ableist assumptions simultaneously. Understanding how lecturers can better support this group has implications for teaching quality, student retention, and institutional transformation. By investigating lecturers' roles across pedagogical, emotional, advocacy, cultural, and reflective dimensions, this study provides a nuanced framework for inclusive practice. It contributes to the growing body of literature advocating for humanising and decolonised pedagogies that affirm diverse identities and ways of knowing. Furthermore, it aligns with the principles of the 4IR by emphasising the use of multimodal, digital, and flexible approaches to accommodate diverse learners in a rapidly evolving educational landscape. Thus, this research is both timely and necessary; it bridges the gap between policy and practice, equity and empathy, and awareness and action, illuminating how university lecturers can act as agents of inclusion and transformation within higher education.

2. Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore how university lecturers contribute to enhancing inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD, focusing on their pedagogical, emotional, advocacy, cultural, and reflective roles within the higher education context.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how university lecturers contribute to enhancing inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and practices within the academic environment (Creswell, 2017). This approach is particularly suitable for examining complex and subjective phenomena such as inclusivity in higher education and the strategies lecturers employ to support neurodivergent students. To ensure the collection of rich, relevant, and context-specific data, purposive sampling was used. This method is effective in qualitative research for selecting participants who possess specific knowledge or experience relevant to the research focus (Burns & Grove, 2010). In total, 15 lecturers were selected from different faculties of the university, ensuring diversity in teaching disciplines, years of experience, and exposure to inclusive teaching practices. Participants were included based on their direct

engagement with neurodivergent students, particularly Black female students diagnosed with ADHD, which ensured that their insights were highly relevant to the study objectives.

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews, a method that provides flexibility while maintaining focus on key research questions (Kallio et al., 2016). This approach allowed the researcher to probe deeper into participants' experiences, follow emerging topics during the interviews, and encourage lecturers to reflect on their inclusive teaching strategies. Interviews were primarily conducted in English, with participants permitted to express themselves in other languages where necessary to ensure clarity and authenticity. Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised to protect participants' identities. For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Transcripts were repeatedly read to develop familiarity, coded inductively, and grouped into overarching themes that captured recurring patterns in participants' responses. Themes were then critically examined in relation to existing literature on inclusive education, neurodiversity, and higher education pedagogy to contextualise the findings.

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, multiple strategies were applied, including member checking to verify the accuracy of interpretations with participants, maintaining a reflexive journal to minimise researcher bias, and cross-referencing emerging themes with established literature to enhance credibility. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained at all stages. The study received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. This study is limited by its relatively small sample size and focus on a single university context, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the perspectives of students themselves were not directly captured, which could provide complementary insights into the effectiveness of lecturers' inclusive practices. Future research could incorporate student voices and expand to multiple institutions for broader applicability.

4. Findings and Discussion

1. Pedagogical Role

The pedagogical role of university lecturers emerged as a critical dimension in enhancing inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. Participants emphasised that traditional, rigid teaching models often disadvantage

neurodivergent students, underscoring the need for diverse instructional strategies that accommodate different learning preferences, attention spans, and processing styles. Participant 8 highlighted the importance of moving away from standardised teaching methods towards multimodal instruction that supports varied engagement styles: "*I've realised that rigid, one-size-fits-all teaching doesn't work, especially for neurodivergent students. I now use multiple formats – slides, visuals, voice recordings, and even summaries on Blackboard – so that students can engage with the content in ways that suit their concentration and learning pace*." Similarly, Participant 3 discussed restructuring lecture delivery to sustain students' attention and minimise fatigue: "*Some students with ADHD struggle to stay focused during long lectures, so I've started breaking lessons into smaller segments and including short activities or discussions in between. It keeps them mentally involved and gives them a moment to reset*." Participant 5 further explained the importance of flexibility and choice in assessment design, noting that alternative formats can better reflect students' understanding: "*Flexibility has been key. I allow students to submit certain assignments in alternative formats, like short videos or infographics, as long as they meet the learning outcomes. It helps neurodivergent students express understanding without being limited by traditional essay structures*."

For Participant 7, embedding Universal Design for Learning principles in module planning was central to inclusive pedagogy: "*I've learnt to build my modules around Universal Design for Learning principles. That means offering varied ways to access materials and demonstrate understanding. For instance, I record my lectures and provide written summaries so students who struggle with attention can revisit them later*." Participant 12 echoed this emphasis on thoughtful lesson design, adding that reducing cognitive overload supports sustained engagement and comprehension: "*I consciously design lesson plans that reduce cognitive overload. For example, I minimise unnecessary text on slides, highlight key points in colour, and repeat core ideas in different ways. These small adjustments help students retain information and stay engaged*." Additionally, Participant 14 noted that structure and predictability enhance focus and reduce anxiety for neurodivergent students: "*Teaching neurodivergent students has taught me the importance of structure and clarity. I outline the agenda at the start of each session and use consistent layouts in my slides. Predictability reduces anxiety and helps students with ADHD manage their attention better*." Participant 15 emphasised equitable assessment practices, noting that providing extra time or flexibility in deadlines ensures fairness rather than advantage: "*In my experience, giving students extra time for assessments or in-class tasks makes a huge difference. It's not about giving them an*

advantage; it's about levelling the field so that neurodivergent students, including those with ADHD, can perform to their true potential."

The data reveal that participants viewed effective pedagogy as grounded in flexibility, accessibility, and responsiveness to the diverse cognitive and emotional needs of learners. Traditional, standardised teaching approaches were seen as insufficient for supporting neurodivergent students, particularly those who experience fluctuating attention, cognitive overload, or anxiety in conventional lecture settings. Consequently, lecturers in this study described a deliberate shift towards multimodal, interactive, and student-centred pedagogies designed to accommodate varied learning preferences and promote equitable participation. This pedagogical orientation aligns with Universal Design for Learning, which advocates for the provision of multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to remove learning barriers (Almeqdad et al., 2023). By incorporating diverse teaching methods such as visual aids, recorded lectures, summaries, and short discussion activities, lecturers created flexible entry points into learning. Such strategies not only support neurodivergent students but also enhance overall classroom inclusivity. As Jardinez and Natividad (2024) note, inclusive pedagogy requires anticipating variability in learners rather than reacting to individual deficits. In this context, lecturers demonstrated proactive design thinking by embedding accessibility features into their teaching rather than treating them as afterthoughts or accommodations.

The participants' emphasis on flexibility in assessment practices further highlights their understanding of inclusion as fairness rather than privilege. Allowing students to demonstrate understanding through alternative formats, such as multimedia projects or visual summaries, reflects an awareness that cognitive diversity shapes how learners process and communicate knowledge. This approach resonates with Losberg and Zwozdiak-Myers' (2024) concept of inclusive pedagogy, which encourages valuing all learners' contributions and designing tasks that recognise different forms of competence. Moreover, the provision of extended time and adaptable deadlines aligns with ADHD-specific educational research showing that time-related adjustments help students regulate focus and manage executive functioning challenges. An important insight emerging from the data is that inclusive pedagogy extends beyond accommodating learning differences; it also involves creating emotionally safe, predictable learning structures. Participants who implemented consistent lesson formats, clear agendas, and visual scaffolding addressed the anxiety and attention management difficulties commonly associated with ADHD. Predictability and clarity reduce uncertainty, which is a significant cognitive stressor for neurodivergent learners (Earnest & Crowley, 2025). In the case of Black

female students with ADHD, such structure also intersects with psychological safety, counteracting the compounded effects of racialised and gendered academic pressures. Thus, pedagogical inclusivity here functions not only as a cognitive support but also as a form of affective and cultural responsiveness.

The findings suggest that lecturers who adopt inclusive pedagogical frameworks effectively transform the learning environment into a space of empowerment and equity. By embracing 4IR-orientated and multimodal teaching methods, lecturers bridge the gap between accessibility and engagement, preparing students for diverse digital and collaborative contexts. The pedagogical practices described reflect a shift from a deficit model, where neurodivergent learners are viewed through the lens of limitation, to an asset-based model that recognises their creativity, resilience, and unique cognitive strengths. This transformation echoes Long and Guo's (2023) call for educators to move beyond mere compliance with inclusion policies toward cultivating cultures of belonging and academic participation. Thus, the pedagogical role of university lecturers in this study represents a redefinition of teaching as an inclusive, reflective, and relational practice. Through intentional course design, multimodal delivery, and equitable assessment, lecturers not only responded to the needs of Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD but also modelled a pedagogy of care and innovation. Their practices affirm that inclusive education is achieved not through uniformity but through flexibility, empathy, and critical awareness of the intersectional realities shaping students' learning experiences.

2. Emotional and Relational Role

Participants highlight the importance of empathy, patience, and trust in fostering an inclusive learning environment for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. Participants emphasised that emotional awareness and relational engagement are crucial in supporting these students, who often face both neurodivergent and intersectional challenges within the academic space. Participant 10 explained that fostering a sense of safety in the classroom begins with acknowledging diverse learning needs. She noted: "*I make it a point to start my classes with a reminder that everyone learns differently. When students see that I genuinely respect those differences, they begin to open up, especially those who struggle with attention or anxiety. Creating that sense of safety is the first step toward inclusion*." Participant 2 highlighted the importance of patience and understanding when engaging with neurodivergent students. She stated: "*With neurodivergent students, patience is everything. Sometimes, they need me to*

repeat instructions or slow the pace a bit. It's not about lowering standards; it's about making sure they feel seen and supported rather than judged or rushed." Recognising the stigma that often affects Black female students with ADHD, Participant 1 discussed how she builds trust and reduces fear of judgement. She remarked: "*I've noticed that Black female students with ADHD often hesitate to ask for help because they fear being labelled as lazy or disorganised. I try to counter that by checking in informally, asking how they're coping, and reminding them that it's okay to seek support. Building that trust changes everything*."

Similarly, Participant 4 emphasised the value of listening empathetically and responding with understanding rather than strictness. She shared: "*I've learnt to listen with empathy when a student explains why they missed a deadline or struggled to focus. Sometimes what they need is not another rule but reassurance that I understand their effort and that I'm willing to find a solution with them*." Participant 11 added that the classroom environment itself shapes students' emotional comfort and sense of belonging. She explained: "*The classroom atmosphere matters. If the tone is cold or overly formal, neurodivergent students tend to withdraw. I try to make my classes interactive and warm so that students, especially Black women navigating multiple identities, feel that they belong*." Participant 6 reinforced the importance of trust and compassionate communication when students disclose personal struggles. She reflected: "*When students trust you, they'll tell you what they're going through, whether it's ADHD-related challenges or emotional burnout. That disclosure is sacred. I always thank them for sharing and reassure them that our goal is to find a way forward together*." Participant 9 captured the essence of empathetic teaching as a cornerstone of inclusivity. She stated: "*Empathy doesn't mean treating everyone the same; it means understanding what each student needs to thrive. For some neurodivergent students, that might be flexibility in participation, for others, it's simply knowing that their lecturer believes in them*."

The data reveal that emotional awareness, empathy, and relational engagement are central to how university lecturers enhance inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. Participants consistently described the importance of creating safe, trusting, and emotionally responsive classroom environments where students feel respected and supported. This approach aligns with Hooks' (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy, which emphasises teaching as an act of care, connection, and shared humanity rather than as a mechanical transfer of knowledge. In this sense, the lecturers' emotional and relational practices represent not only pedagogical strategies but also ethical commitments to inclusivity. The lecturers' emphasis on empathy and patience reflects the essence of humanising pedagogy,

which seeks to affirm students' dignity and lived experiences. By acknowledging that students learn differently and by practising patience when providing instructions or feedback, lecturers dismantle the deficit perceptions often attached to ADHD behaviours. This relational approach allows neurodivergent students to feel seen and valued beyond their diagnoses, fostering psychological safety and engagement. Rogers' (1983) theory of person-centred education similarly highlights the importance of unconditional positive regard and empathy in enabling learners to thrive. Within this framework, the lecturers' behaviour mirrors a humanistic belief that emotional connection precedes cognitive development. Importantly, participants' reflections demonstrate an acute awareness of the intersectional experiences of Black neurodivergent female students. The lecturers recognised that such students often contend with racialised and gendered stereotypes that frame them as "angry", "lazy", or "disorganised". This sensitivity aligns with Shaw's (2025) concept of intersectionality, which highlights how overlapping identities, race, gender, and neurodivergence create compounded barriers in academic spaces. Through informal check-ins, compassionate communication, and trust-building, lecturers intentionally disrupt these stereotypes. In doing so, they model culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), which values students' social and cultural contexts as essential to their learning experience.

From an interpretive standpoint, the emotional and relational role functions as the affective foundation of inclusivity. The lecturers' empathy-driven engagement transforms the classroom into a psychologically safe environment where disclosure, self-expression, and vulnerability are possible. This supports Zhang's (2023) argument that teacher empathy significantly correlates with improved learner outcomes, motivation, and well-being. The lecturers' actions, listening empathetically, validating students' challenges, and offering flexibility, illustrate how emotional intelligence can translate into pedagogical equity. Furthermore, the data suggest that emotional safety catalyses academic confidence and belonging. When lecturers create affirming spaces, students are more likely to participate, seek help, and persist academically despite their challenges. This aligns with Kennie-Kaulbach and Janke's (2025) concept of threshold concepts, where emotional engagement enables deeper cognitive transformation. Therefore, emotional and relational responsiveness is not ancillary to academic success; it is integral to it. Thus, the data highlights that inclusivity extends beyond curriculum adaptation; it is relationally enacted through empathy, patience, and trust. For Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD, whose experiences are often marked by invisibility or stigma, emotionally intelligent teaching becomes a form of resistance and empowerment. Lecturers

who humanise learning interactions thus play a transformative role in bridging emotional well-being with academic participation, reinforcing that inclusive education is as much about how we teach as what we teach.

3. Advocacy and Support Role

Participants highlight the role of university lecturers as advocates and supporters in promoting inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. They emphasised that advocacy involves recognising individual needs, facilitating access to institutional resources, challenging systemic barriers, and fostering a culture of care and understanding within and beyond the classroom. Participant 1 explained that advocacy begins with empathy and proactive engagement. They described how noticing a student's struggle requires understanding rather than judgement: "*When I notice a student struggling to stay focused or manage deadlines, I don't assume it's a lack of effort. I take time to talk to her privately and, if necessary, refer her to the university's disability unit for proper support. Advocacy starts with seeing students as individuals who need understanding, not judgement*."

Participant 3 highlighted the importance of guiding students through institutional processes, particularly those unaware of their rights or available support: "*I see part of my role as helping students navigate institutional systems. Sometimes neurodivergent students aren't even aware that they qualify for academic accommodations. I make it a point to explain the process and connect them to the right services, especially those who may feel marginalised because of race or gender*."

Participant 5 viewed advocacy as extending beyond classroom practice into institutional decision-making spaces: "*For me, advocacy means using my voice in faculty meetings to remind colleagues that inclusion isn't optional. When we discuss curriculum or assessment changes, I always bring up how those decisions might affect students with ADHD or other learning differences*." Participant 8 focused on destigmatising neurodiversity and creating a safe environment for disclosure and dialogue: "*I've realised that many students, especially Black female students with ADHD, hesitate to disclose their condition because of stigma. I try to normalise conversations about mental health and neurodiversity in class, so they feel safe seeking help or sharing what support they need*." Participant 10 underscored the importance of continuous emotional and academic support beyond referrals: "*Support goes beyond the classroom. Sometimes I follow up with students after referring them to counselling or academic support just to check how they're coping. It shows them they're not alone and that the*

institution genuinely cares about their wellbeing." Participant 13 discussed advocacy as a form of institutional activism, highlighting the lecturer's responsibility to challenge exclusionary policies: "*I consider myself an advocate within the system. When I see policies that don't work for neurodivergent students, I raise concerns with management. If we want inclusivity to be real, lecturers have to be the bridge between students' needs and institutional policy*."

The data highlight that university lecturers play a pivotal advocacy and support role in enhancing inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. This role extends beyond academic instruction to include empathetic engagement, proactive guidance, and institutional representation. Participants demonstrated an understanding that advocacy begins with awareness, acknowledging students' unique neurodivergent needs while recognising the intersectional challenges that arise from being both Black and female in academic spaces. Lecturers who adopt an advocacy mindset actively resist deficit-based interpretations of student behaviour and instead approach learning difficulties through a compassionate and inclusive lens. This finding aligns with Hooks' (1994) concept of "engaged pedagogy," which emphasises empathy, care, and holistic understanding in the teaching process. The lecturers' discussions reflected the essence of inclusive teaching as defined by Jardinez et al. (2024), who argue that inclusive practice requires adapting institutional systems to meet students' diverse learning needs. Participants described advocacy as guiding students toward existing institutional support mechanisms, such as disability units and counselling services. This is consistent with Gull et al.'s (2010) findings that students with disabilities often remain unaware of available accommodations unless staff actively facilitate access. By helping students navigate bureaucratic processes and connecting them to appropriate resources, lecturers fulfil a critical mediating function between institutional policy and student experience, thereby reducing systemic exclusion. Moreover, advocacy in this context was framed as an act of institutional citizenship, with lecturers using their professional voice to influence policy and curriculum design in favour of neurodiverse inclusion. This resonates with Ainscow's (2020) argument that advocacy is a collective responsibility within higher education, requiring staff to question institutional norms that marginalise certain learners. By raising awareness of neurodiversity in faculty meetings and curriculum discussions, lecturers not only promote equity but also contribute to systemic transformation, which is central to decolonising education (Dawson, 2022). Such activism reflects what Opoku (2023) describes as "inclusive leadership in teaching," where educators bridge the gap between policy intentions and the lived realities of marginalised students.

Participants also underscored that advocacy involves destigmatising neurodivergence and fostering safe spaces for disclosure. This is particularly important for Black female students, who often experience a triple burden of racial, gendered, and neurodivergent stigma. Creating open dialogues around mental health and learning differences helps to normalise neurodiversity, encouraging students to seek help without fear of judgement. This interpretation aligns with Srinivasan (2022), who emphasises that inclusive academic environments are built on relational trust and the normalisation of neurodiverse identities. Lecturers' follow-up with students beyond formal referrals also illustrates a sustained commitment to emotional and academic well-being, echoing Jardinez's (2024) view that inclusion is a continuous process of relationship-building rather than a set of isolated practices. Thus, it becomes evident that advocacy and support function as the connective tissue between individual care and institutional change. Lecturers who adopt advocacy roles embody both micro-level empathy and macro-level agency, responding compassionately to students' needs while simultaneously challenging exclusionary practices. For Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD, such dual advocacy is transformative; it validates their experiences and affirms their right to equitable participation in academic life. This reinforces that inclusive learning environments are not achieved solely through policies but through the sustained, intentional advocacy of lecturers who act as both educators and change agents.

4. Culturally Responsive Role

The data highlights how university lecturers consciously incorporate cultural awareness and sensitivity into their teaching practices to create inclusive environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. Participants emphasised the importance of recognising how race, gender, and neurodivergence intersect to shape learning experiences. They discussed how culturally responsive pedagogy enables students to feel seen, respected, and empowered within academic spaces. Participant 15 reflected that being culturally responsive involves recognising students as whole individuals rather than defining them by their diagnoses. The participant explained: "*I've realised that being culturally responsive means seeing the student beyond the diagnosis. When teaching Black female students with ADHD, I try to understand how their cultural background and lived experiences influence how they learn and express themselves*." Participant 2 elaborated on how misinterpretations of behaviour can arise when cultural communication styles are overlooked, stating that: "*Sometimes, what's interpreted as inattentiveness or impulsiveness is actually a student*

expressing herself differently because of cultural communication styles. As lecturers, we need to unlearn those biases and interpret behaviour within a cultural context." Participant 13 highlighted the significance of representation in course content, noting that inclusive materials enhance engagement and belonging: "*I intentionally include readings and examples from African scholars and women in my course materials. When students see themselves reflected in the content, especially those who already feel 'different', it boosts their confidence and participation*."

Participant 4 addressed the issue of stereotype threat, observing that cultural expectations often silence students: "*I've noticed that some Black female students with ADHD hesitate to speak up because they fear being labelled 'too loud' or 'emotional.' Creating a space where their voices are valued, and not judged, is part of my commitment to being culturally responsive*." Participant 7 emphasised the power of inclusive language in shaping perceptions of neurodivergence: "*I try to use language that acknowledges and respects identity. For example, I avoid deficit terms like 'disordered' and instead talk about neurodiversity as a strength. That shift in language helps students feel respected and included*." Participant 6 highlighted the importance of professional learning and collaboration in sustaining culturally responsive teaching: "*To support inclusivity, I consult with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds and attend workshops on intersectionality. Understanding how race, gender, and neurodivergence intersect helps me design lessons that reach all students meaningfully*."

The data revealed that lecturers who adopt culturally responsive pedagogy intentionally engage with students' lived realities, recognising how race, gender, and neurodivergence intersect to shape individual learning experiences. This role goes beyond accommodating disability to fostering an environment that affirms identity, dignity, and belonging (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Participants demonstrated an understanding that culturally responsive teaching requires acknowledging the socio-historical and psychological factors that influence how these students engage academically and socially. The discussion highlights that culturally responsive lecturers perceive students as holistic individuals, not merely through the lens of their diagnoses. This aligns with Gay's (2018) argument that culturally responsive teaching validates students' cultural identities as assets in the learning process rather than deficits to be corrected. By viewing Black neurodivergent female students as multidimensional beings, lecturers promote inclusivity that respects the whole person, acknowledging both cognitive and cultural diversity. This awareness enables lecturers to create environments where difference is normalised and valued, consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning.

The participants' insights also illuminate how cultural misinterpretations can exacerbate bias in academic settings. When lecturers overlook the influence of cultural communication styles, behaviours associated with ADHD, such as impulsivity or restlessness, can be pathologised rather than contextualised. The data suggests that lecturers who engage in reflective practice and unlearn implicit biases are better equipped to interpret behaviours within cultural and neurodivergent frameworks. This interpretation resonates with Bauer et al.'s (1991) theory of intersectionality, which argues that systems of oppression overlap to shape distinct experiences of marginalisation. In this study, lecturers' awareness of intersecting identities helped mitigate misjudgements and fostered empathetic responses to student behaviour. Representation emerged as another vital element of cultural responsiveness. Lecturers who include scholarly voices and examples from African and female academics enhance a sense of belonging and engagement for marginalised students. As Fears (2024) notes, representation in curriculum and discourse validates students' intellectual presence and reinforces the idea that their perspectives matter. The participants' efforts to diversify course content demonstrate a practical approach to decolonising the curriculum, a key aspect of inclusive higher education. Through this, students are not only reflected in the academic material but are also empowered to see themselves as knowledge producers rather than passive recipients. Furthermore, the data illustrates how language choice shapes perceptions of neurodiversity. Participants' conscious shift from deficit-based to affirming language aligns with neurodiversity frameworks that advocate for celebrating neurological difference as a form of human variation rather than pathology (Cohn & Harrison, 2025). By using inclusive and respectful terminology, lecturers redefine learning spaces as supportive and identity-affirming, helping to dismantle stigma and promote psychological safety. This practice is essential in reducing stereotype threat, which can silence students who fear being judged through racialised or gendered stereotypes

Professional development and collaboration also featured prominently in participants' accounts. Lecturers' engagement in continuous learning, consultation, and dialogue with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds enhances the sustainability of culturally responsive practice. This supports Browns's (2022) assertion that cultural responsiveness is not innate but developed through reflection, collaboration, and ongoing education. By participating in workshops and peer learning, lecturers not only refine their teaching but also contribute to an institutional culture of inclusion. The findings indicate that the culturally responsive role of university lecturers serves as a transformative mechanism for promoting inclusivity, equity, and belonging among Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. Through culturally

informed pedagogy, representation in curriculum, inclusive language use, and continuous professional development, lecturers actively challenge the dominance of Eurocentric and deficit-orientated paradigms in higher education. This role extends beyond individual practice; it signifies a broader institutional commitment to intersectional inclusivity, where cultural awareness and neurodiversity coexist as foundational principles of learning. The interpretation reinforces that true inclusivity requires not only policy frameworks but also daily pedagogical practices that humanise education and affirm the multiplicity of student identities.

5. Reflective and Developmental Role

The participants highlight how university lecturers engage in continuous self-reflection and professional development to enhance inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. They demonstrated an understanding that inclusion is an evolving practice requiring introspection, collaboration, and a willingness to unlearn biases. Participant 9 reflected that inclusion is not a fixed achievement but a continuous process that demands self-assessment and adaptability. The participant stated: "*I've realised that inclusion is not something you perfect once; it's a continuous journey. I often reflect on my lessons and ask myself whether my teaching style unintentionally disadvantages some students, especially those who may be neurodivergent or come from different cultural backgrounds*." Participant 11 explained how professional learning influenced their practice, noting that training on neurodiversity reshaped their approach to teaching and engagement. The participant shared: "*After attending a workshop on neurodiversity, I became more aware of how ADHD manifests differently in female students. That session pushed me to rethink my classroom structure and to design activities that allow for flexibility and multiple modes of engagement*." Participant 7 emphasised the role of ongoing reflection in identifying and addressing barriers to inclusion in everyday teaching. The participant remarked: "*Reflection has become part of my routine. When a student seems disengaged, I no longer assume disinterest; I pause and ask myself what I can adjust. Sometimes, it's a small change, like breaking down instructions or offering materials in advance, that makes all the difference*." Participant 10 highlighted the importance of confronting personal biases and redefining traditional perceptions of student performance. The participant explained: "*I've learnt to unlearn some of my own biases about what a 'good student' looks like. Some students process information differently, and that's okay. Being reflective helps me see potential instead of problems*." Participant 12 described professional development as a vital aspect of reflective practice and personal growth, stating:

"*I regularly take part in professional development sessions on inclusive pedagogy. These sessions help me to stay updated, but more importantly, they challenge me to see inclusivity not as an institutional demand but as a personal responsibility*."

The data reveal that university lecturers perceive reflection and continuous professional development as central to fostering inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. Participants recognised that inclusion is not a static goal but an evolving pedagogical practice that demands self-awareness, critical evaluation, and adaptability. This perspective aligns with Suphasri and Chinokul's (2021) concept of the reflective practitioner, which emphasises the need for educators to engage in ongoing introspection to refine their professional judgement and teaching methods. Lecturers in this study demonstrated that reflective practice enables them to identify barriers within their instructional strategies and to implement necessary adjustments that support diverse learners more effectively. Furthermore, the participants' emphasis on re-evaluating teaching practices reflects the principles of transformative learning theory (Ezeani, 2024), which posits that reflection allows individuals to question and reshape previously held assumptions. By reassessing traditional notions of "good" student behaviour or performance, lecturers in this study moved towards more inclusive understandings of engagement and achievement, particularly for students whose learning patterns deviate from neurotypical norms. This shift is crucial for addressing the intersectional challenges faced by Black neurodivergent female students, who often navigate both racialised and ableist expectations within higher education (Nelson & Lichwa, 2025).

Professional development emerged as a key enabler of reflective growth, offering lecturers the opportunity to learn new strategies for supporting neurodiverse students and to integrate 4IR-aligned, flexible teaching approaches into their classrooms. This finding echoes the arguments of Al-Gerafi et al. (2024), who stress that effective inclusion in higher education requires continuous professional learning that fosters empathy, responsiveness, and pedagogical innovation. By participating in workshops on neurodiversity and inclusive pedagogy, lecturers not only expanded their knowledge base but also internalised inclusivity as a personal and ethical commitment rather than an institutional mandate. The findings suggest that reflective and developmental engagement transforms the role of lecturers from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of equitable learning. Through reflection, lecturers become more sensitive to the lived experiences of Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD and more equipped to design learning environments that acknowledge difference as a strength. Such an approach

aligns with the humanising pedagogy advocated by Cappiali (2025), which calls for teaching that recognises the full humanity and agency of all learners. Therefore, the reflective and developmental role of lecturers is not merely procedural; it is transformative, ensuring that inclusivity becomes an ongoing, lived practice embedded in everyday teaching.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Strengthen inclusive pedagogical practices

University management and faculty leadership should prioritise the institutionalisation of inclusive pedagogical practices across all teaching and learning activities. This can be implemented through structured training workshops and curriculum development initiatives led by the university's Centre for Academic Development and Teaching and Learning Division. These units should guide lecturers in adopting Universal Design for Learning frameworks, promoting multimodal teaching, flexible assessments, and the integration of 4IR tools to support diverse cognitive styles. Examples include incorporating visual, auditory, and interactive learning materials, offering flexible submission formats, and designing digital platforms that accommodate various learning needs. Implementing these practices will not only enhance accessibility for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD but also improve the overall quality of teaching and inclusivity within the university. The significance of this recommendation lies in shifting pedagogy from a one-size-fits-all model to a student-centred approach that values diversity as an academic asset rather than a limitation.

2. Prioritise emotional and relational pedagogy

University faculties, through the Human Resources Development Unit and Academic Staff Training Office, should facilitate continuous professional development that equips lecturers with emotional intelligence and humanising pedagogical skills. This involves offering workshops and reflective sessions on empathy-driven teaching, trauma-informed pedagogy, and inclusive communication strategies. Lecturers should be encouraged to conduct informal check-ins, build relational trust, and create psychologically safe classroom spaces where students feel seen and supported. Mentorship programmes that pair lecturers with specialists from the Counselling and Wellness Centre can also strengthen their capacity to support neurodivergent students experiencing anxiety or self-esteem challenges. Implementing emotionally responsive teaching practices is significant because it transforms classrooms into compassionate, affirming spaces that promote both academic engagement and emotional well-

being. For Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD, such environments reduce stereotype threat, increase participation, and foster a deeper sense of belonging in academic spaces.

3. Institutionalise advocacy and support structures

University leadership should formalise a lecturer advocacy framework that connects academic staff, student support units, and institutional policy structures to ensure equitable inclusion for neurodivergent students. This could be coordinated by the Office for Student Affairs, in collaboration with the Disability Unit and Faculty Inclusivity Committees. Lecturers should receive clear guidelines on how to identify students who may require additional support and how to refer them to appropriate services, such as academic counselling, assistive technology programmes, and mental health resources. Furthermore, the university should establish Advocacy Champions within each faculty, trained lecturers who serve as first points of contact for neurodivergent and marginalised students. This structured support system ensures that inclusion is proactive rather than reactive. The significance of this recommendation is that it bridges the gap between policy and lived experience, transforming lecturers into active advocates who mediate institutional accessibility and ensure that no student is excluded due to systemic or attitudinal barriers.

4. Promote culturally responsive teaching

The Teaching and Learning Centre and Transformation Division should collaboratively develop programmes that promote culturally responsive teaching among lecturers. This initiative can include anti-bias training, curriculum diversification workshops, and collaborative forums where lecturers reflect on race, gender, and neurodiversity in higher education. Lecturers should be guided to incorporate African, feminist, and neurodiversity-informed scholarship into their course materials and to use inclusive, affirming language when addressing or describing students. Moreover, representation in case studies, readings, and classroom discussions should reflect the diversity of students' identities, helping to dismantle racialised and gendered stereotypes. Implementing culturally responsive pedagogy ensures that Black neurodivergent female students see their identities validated in the curriculum, thereby strengthening engagement and reducing alienation. The significance of this recommendation lies in advancing epistemic justice and curriculum decolonisation, both of which are central to inclusive, equitable, and humanising education in the post-apartheid higher education context.

5. Foster continuous reflection and professional development

Universities should embed reflective practice and professional learning into lecturers' ongoing performance and development frameworks. This can be achieved through peer learning communities, annual teaching reflection portfolios, and collaborative dialogues facilitated by the Centre for Academic Staff Development. Lecturers should be encouraged to critically examine their teaching assumptions, biases, and methods to identify areas for improvement. Participation in professional development workshops on neurodiversity inclusion, intersectionality, and 4IR-aligned teaching innovations should be mandatory components of academic growth plans. Regular reflection sessions, possibly integrated into departmental meetings, would encourage knowledge sharing and collective learning. The significance of this recommendation lies in sustaining an evolving culture of inclusion, ensuring that inclusive teaching becomes an embedded, reflexive practice rather than a temporary institutional trend. By continuously developing reflective, adaptive educators, the university can maintain its commitment to accessible, equitable, and future-orientated education.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how university lecturers contribute to enhancing inclusive learning environments for Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD. The findings revealed that inclusive education is not achieved through policy statements alone, but through the everyday practices, empathy, and advocacy of lecturers who intentionally design and humanise the learning experience. The roles identified, pedagogical, emotional, advocacy-based, culturally responsive, and reflective, collectively demonstrate that effective inclusion is both a professional and moral responsibility. Through these dimensions, lecturers have the power to transform classrooms into spaces of belonging, empowerment, and academic growth. The findings highlight that inclusion begins with pedagogical flexibility. Lecturers who integrate multimodal instruction and 4IR-orientated learning tools actively reduce barriers to engagement for neurodivergent learners. Similarly, emotional and relational pedagogy emerged as central to fostering trust and confidence, especially for Black female students navigating intersectional experiences of marginalisation. When lecturers teach with empathy and emotional awareness, they create psychologically safe environments that nurture both cognitive and affective growth. Moreover, the advocacy and support role extends this inclusivity beyond the classroom, as lecturers act as bridges between students and institutional structures, ensuring equitable access to academic and emotional support systems. The

culturally responsive role further affirms that genuine inclusion must engage with students' cultural, racial, and gender identities. By embedding representation and anti-bias practices into teaching, lecturers validate the lived realities of Black neurodivergent female students and dismantle stereotypes that hinder participation. The reflective and developmental role highlights the need for continuous professional introspection. Inclusive education is an evolving process, one that demands humility, critical reflection, and lifelong learning from lecturers and institutions alike. These insights reveal that the creation of inclusive learning environments requires a whole-institution approach, one that unites lecturers, administrators, policymakers, and students in a shared commitment to accessibility, diversity, and equity. Institutions must invest in sustained professional development, resource allocation, and policy reform to ensure that inclusive teaching is embedded in every aspect of academic life. Lecturers, in turn, must embrace their roles as both educators and advocates, using reflection, empathy, and innovation to transform exclusionary practices into opportunities for growth and participation.

Higher education institutions stand at a crucial juncture in redefining what it means to be inclusive in the 21st century. The time for reactive inclusion is over; the time for proactive transformation is now. University leaders must champion inclusive pedagogical frameworks and provide the structural support that enables lecturers to teach without barriers and students to learn without fear. Lecturers are called to move beyond compliance and embody a pedagogy rooted in care, cultural consciousness, and digital adaptability. Policymakers must ensure that institutional language, assessment, and curriculum frameworks reflect intersectional awareness and practical inclusivity. Thus, there is a need to create universities where every student, regardless of race, gender, or neurotype, can thrive intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Building such environments affirms the core values of justice, equity, and humanity at the heart of education. Through intentional action, collaboration, and reflective practice, the vision of inclusive higher education can become a lived reality, one that not only supports Black neurodivergent female students with ADHD but transforms the university into a truly inclusive, future-ready institution.

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