

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN JORDAN

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The study examined students with disabilities perspectives toward their experiences in a public University in Jordan using a survey approach. The aim of this study was to take a closer look at the experiences of students with disabilities in Jordan and, in light of new legislation, to identify obstacles in the higher education system. It found that there was still much work to be done to enhance the higher education experiences for students with disabilities and identified several issues that should be addressed in order to enable access and entitlement to higher education. Recommendations and implications for future research are discussed in the context of the current disability legislation in Jordan.

In 2009, the population of Jordan was estimated to be approximately six million (Jordan Statistical Yearbook, 2009). Applying the proposed population growth rate of 2.2 % and considering the number of Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Jordan, the population of Jordan will be around seven million by the end of 2012. Jordan ranks number one in the Arab World in education (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2012). Despite strained resources in Jordan, the Ministry of Education developed highly advanced national curriculum and many other nations in the region have developed their education system using Jordan as a model.

Higher Education, Disability, and Legislation in Jordan

During the last two decades, the sector of higher education in Jordan witnessed a prominent development as well as progress evidenced by the increasing number of institutions of higher education, enrolled students, faculty members, administrative and academic members, size of expenditures, and the financial government support to this significant educational sector. The number of public universities as a result has reached 10, besides 17 universities that are private and 51 community colleges. This progress in numbers of universities accompanied by significant increase in number of students enrolled to study in these universities, where the number of enrolled students in both public and private universities is estimated at nearly 236 thousand; 28 thousand out of the total are from Arab or foreign nationalities (The Ministry of Higher Education, 2012).

Higher Education (HE) institutes in Jordan are required to make reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities and it is no longer possible for them to justify failing to do so. According to Jordanian Law (31) on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, (Section B) Education and Higher Education, the main responsibilities of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education are:

(a) providing persons with disabilities with general, vocational, and higher education opportunities in accordance with their disability category through integration; (b) adopting inclusive education program between students with disabilities and non-disabled counterparts and implementing these programs within the framework of educational institutions; (c) making available reasonable accommodation that assist persons with disabilities to learn, communicate, receive training, and enjoy mobility, such tools should include Braille methods, sign language for the deaf and other necessary equipment and tools; (d) carrying out educational diagnosis within the overall comprehensive diagnosis team to determine the nature of disability, its degree and requirement; (e) creating qualified technical cadres for dealing with students with disabilities; (f) carrying out guidance, awareness, and orientation programs for students with disabilities and their families; (g) providing modern techniques for educating with disabilities in the public and private sectors, including teaching mathematics and computer skills; (h) admitting students with disabilities who pass the General Secondary Studies Examination to public universities, in

accordance with conditions to be agreed upon between the Higher Council for the Affairs of Persons with Disabilities and the Council of Higher Education; and (i) making available methods of communication for persons with hearing disabilities, including sign translators. (The Higher Council for the Affairs of Persons with Disabilities, 2007, p.4).

Additionally, Jordan is one of the countries that signed on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It can be concluded from the legislation movement in Jordan that there is now a requirement for HE institutes to anticipate the needs of students with disabilities and to make adjustments that will apply for all students, rather than responding reactively to their needs on an individual basis. While all of these signs of progress were encouraging, the student case studies in Jordan (Masaedeh, 1995) and other countries (Barnes, 2005; Butterwick&Benjamin, 2006; Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Hougann, 1987) revealed gaps between policy and practice and showed that significant barriers remain to the participation of students with disabilities in education and HE.

Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Students with disabilities have long been denied the opportunities to pursue HE around the world. However, they have increasingly participated in HE in recent years. The surveys and statistical data suggest that nearly 9%, 5%, and 3% of all students in HE programs have a type of disability in the US, the UK, and Australia, respectively (Henderson, 2001; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2002; Productivity Commission, 2003). However, it is very essential to consider the facilities available in the school and university complexes which have to be suitable for the needs of students with disabilities. There should be a careful attention to the design of the classrooms that has to accommodate the type of disabilities exhibited by students who are included in the classroom. Diverse severity of the disabilities represented between the disabled students in the class might need special demands from the classroom teacher. For example, those students with totally blind, deafness, physically impaired, will require a significant instructional accommodations or curriculum modifications. The classroom space, design, location, lights, elevators, and assistive tools should be considered in environmental settings (Schmidt & Cagran, 2008).

In addition, students with disabilities pose particular challenges to HE not only in terms of gaining physical access to buildings, but also in relation to much wider access issues concerning the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment. For example, (Fuller et al., 2004) studied obstacles that faced students with disabilities at university. The results of the study indicated that there were many obstacles such as the fast rate of the teachers' speech during the lectures, as well as difficulty in participating in the discussion and answering the questions. Also some lecturers resented allowing disabled students to tape the lectures, and it was hard to access the educational centers. There was a lack of suitable computer programs. Another study conducted by (Haugann, 1987) to identify the visual impairment students' problems in higher educational institutions. The results indicated that these students face many different problems; for example the absence of counseling services, few numbers of Braille printed books, lack of visual readers, the difficulty of adjustment with the university life, teachers' neglect of their special needs, and the problem of taking exams and transport in were the most important. Holloway (2001) reported that students may face increases in stress, additional time demands and financial burdens in trying to circumvent these barriers. Many studies, though, do also report examples of good practice in terms of provision of support and a desire to improve and widen access for students with disabilities (see Fuller et al., 2004). When students with disabilities enter higher education they are taking up an opportunity to increase their knowledge, to develop their social skills, to obtain good qualifications and to expose themselves to debate and discussion. It is an important experience for empowerment (Hurst, 1996, p. 141).

Significance of the Study

In line with disability equality legislation, universities are expected to make reasonable and anticipatory adjustments to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices and students are legally entitled to these adjustments. Furthermore, Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson (2005) suggested that until HE institutions consult students with disabilities directly they will remain ignorant of the difficulties and barriers faced by them. Thus, students with disabilities are being marginalized by HE institutions who are not sufficiently adopting positive strategies to consult students with disabilities when implementing policies and practices to break down barriers to study (Green, 2007). In fact, Hurst (1999) argued that hearing the voices and lived experiences of students with disabilities should be a central tenet of successfully understanding their needs and as such they should be proactively consulted and empowered to advocate their views.

Although educational policies in Jordan promise to take into consideration the necessity to provide basic and comprehensive services for students with disabilities, recent research on disability in Jordan and empirical data gathered during fieldwork in 2012 all point to the serious disadvantages faced by people with disabilities in Jordan in relation to every area of life, including education (Al-Rossan, 2012). It is no secret that disabled students are under-represented in higher education. Despite the growing interest in issues surrounding inclusion of students with disabilities in HE in Jordan, the voices of students with disabilities have rarely been heard.

Listening to the experiences of students with disabilities themselves has the advantage of letting individuals express their 'lived experience' of being a student in Higher Education and enables the physical and hidden barriers that they encounter to be highlighted. Examining the students' perspectives provides an insight into ongoing practices at HEIs and generates knowledge about how to make HE more accessible to students with disabilities in Jordan.

Study Purposes

The main aim of the study is to identify the obstacles to the inclusion of the students with disabilities in a public University in Jordan. These obstacles will be highlighted to provide enough information to the decision makers in the University and the Higher Education Ministry so they will be able to recognize such obstacles and consider them carefully while planning for inclusion in the University. Therefore, the final aim of this study is to make recommendations to enhance the quality of the learning experience of students with disabilities. This study addressed the following question: what obstacles do students with disabilities face in a public university in Jordan?

Method

Participants

A total sample of 52 undergraduate students with disabilities from a southern university in Jordan participated in the study. There were 27 students with health and physical impairment, 20 students with visual impairment, and 5 students with hearing impairment. The ages ranged from 19 to 23 years of age with the majority being 20 years old. Forty seven students were in humanitarian colleges and five in scientific colleges. Of the total sample, 15 were males and 37 females. These students enrolled in the first semester of 2012/2013. The University in which the research was undertaken was a large public southern University in Jordan with around 17,000 students, 550 academic staff, and 12 colleges.

Procedure

A letter from the author was submitted to the University to request an ethical approval for the study. This letter was supplemented by the survey and the study purposes. When approved, The Dean of Students' Affairs in the University provided the researcher with all descriptive information for this research. The researcher approached students with disabilities and asked their permission to be part of the study. Students were assured that the study was for scientific purposes only and that their responses were confidential and anonymous. They were urged to respond to all items to the best of their knowledge. The students completed the hard copy of the survey and handed it back to the researcher within one week after the survey was given to them. Consent for participation was obtained from all participants. All data was collected during the month of September of 2012.

A cover letter explaining the survey purposes, the term of inclusion, and the estimated time of filling it out (30 minutes) was presented in the beginning of the study. For the purpose of this study, inclusion was defined as *reconstruction of the educational process including its educational services, curriculum, and the rehabilitation of the staff's beliefs and roles in the educational field in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities* (The Higher Council for the Affairs of Persons with Disabilities, 2007, p.2). The person with disabilities: *any person suffering from permanent, partial or total impairment affecting any of his/her senses, or his/her physical, psychological or mental capabilities, to an extent that undermines his/her ability to learn, work, or be rehabilitated, and in a way which renders him/her unable to meet her/his normal day-to-day requirements under circumstances similar to those of non disabled persons*. Reasonable accommodation: *the necessary fixtures to adapt the environment conditions related to the place, time, and the provision of equipment, tools and assistive devices wherever necessary to ensure that persons with disabilities exercise their rights on equal basis with others provided that this shall not inflict serious damage on the party concerned* (The Higher Council for the Affairs of Persons with Disabilities, 2007, p.2).

Instrument

The survey instrument had two main sections. The first section requested descriptive information about the age, student's gender, student's college, and student's disability. The second section requested information about the students' knowledge of the Jordanian Law (31) on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Specifically, section (B): Education and Higher Education. The survey included 15 items that were distributed randomly to mitigate order effects and selection bias. The 15 items of the instrument were formulated based on a review of relevant literature and reports (Alqaryouti, 2010; Barnes, 2005; Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006; Fuller et al., 2004; Hougann, 1987; Masaedeh, 1995; Schmidt & Cagran, 2008).

Areas covered in the survey included: general needs and services, students' Disability Office and designated resources in the University, physical environment and assistive devices, staff, reasonable accommodation, inclusion, and major challenges and obstacles that faced by students with disabilities in the University. The responses on 14 of the items were in Likert-type forms designated as follows: (a) yes always, yes sometimes, and no; (b) very adequately, adequately, inadequately, and very inadequately; (c) very easy access, reasonable access, poor access, and very poor access; (d) yes but only some of the buildings and no, none are accessible; (e) yes definitely, yes maybe, and no; and (f) yes or no. The item number 15 was an open-ended question that asked participants to list the major challenges and obstacles in the University.

Validity and Analyses

To establish the face and content validity of the instrument, an initial version of the survey was given to 10 university instructors. These referees were asked to judge the content of the survey and provide feedback. They made comments on a few items and suggested merging some items due to similarity of their meanings, and re-phrasing some for more clarity; these suggested changes were taken into consideration when making the final version of the survey. In addition, internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha measures how well a set of variables measures a single unidimensional latent construct (Field, 2009). The instrument had a high coefficient (.91) of reliability.

In order to respond to the research questions, the information from the closed-ended items in the questionnaire was entered into the statistical package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Inc., Chicago IL, 2008). An exploratory analysis approach was applied to all data, providing frequency distributions as well as graphical displays of data. In addition, to generate categories and themes for the item number 15, the researcher was immersed with the data by reading the students' responses to this question many times. Then generate the category through the prolonged engagement with the data (the students' answers). These categories then become buckets into which segments of text are placed. These categories are internally consistent but distinct from one another (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.159).

Results

The students with disabilities were asked to indicate their level of knowledge about the section in the Jordanian Law (31) on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that affect postsecondary education. Only 19% (10) of the students indicated that they were familiar with the law. A closer inspection of the data is introduced in the form the percentages, frequencies (see Table 1), and themes for an open ended question of the survey items in the next sections according to the covered domain.

Generally, Table 1 indicates that most of the students' responses were negative to most of the study's items. For the domains General Needs and Services and Reasonable Accommodation, most of the students believe that not only the university did not support them with the necessary resources that should meet their needs but also the services and the reasonable accommodations were inadequate. With regard to the Student Disability Office and Designated Resources in the University, most of the students demonstrate bad experiences. Their responses to all items of this domain show that they did not have an easy access to the disability office nor they have enough staff and resources or experienced staff who have good understanding of disability issues and students needs. In addition, the responses in the Physical Environment and Assistive Devices and staff domains indicated that the students were also not happy with the availability of the assistive devices and the teaching staff who were not trained or equipped to deal with disabilities issues. However, they expressed that some of the residential accommodations and indoor or outdoor facilities were accessible to them. Finally, regarding the inclusion domain, students' responses indicated that the university should do more to support the

inclusion of students with disabilities and this is evident since most of the students do not have many friends without disabilities in the university.

Table 1. Percentages and Frequencies of the study's items

| Domain/Item | Item's Response | Percentages (%) | Frequencies |
|---|------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| General Needs and Services | | | |
| 1- Do you have all the resources necessary to meet your study needs? | yes always | 7 | 4 |
| | yes sometimes | 10 | 5 |
| | no | 83 | 43 |
| 2- How adequately do these services address your needs? | very adequately | 5 | 2 |
| | adequately | 7 | 4 |
| | inadequately | 65 | 34 |
| | very inadequately | 23 | 12 |
| Student Disability Office and Designated Resources in the University | | | |
| 1- Do you have an easy access to the Students Disability Office? | very easy access | 2 | 1 |
| | reasonable access | 9 | 5 |
| | poor access | 70 | 36 |
| | very poor access | 19 | 10 |
| 2- Is there a sufficient number of staff in the Students Disability Office to meet students' needs in your opinion? | yes always | 5 | 3 |
| | yes sometimes | 23 | 12 |
| | no | 72 | 37 |
| 3- Does the staff in the Disability Office demonstrate a good understanding of disability issues and student needs? | yes always | 4 | 2 |
| | yes sometimes | 19 | 10 |
| | no | 77 | 40 |
| 4- Does the Disability Office have the resources to address your needs (e.g., budget, facilities, and equipment)? | yes always | 7 | 4 |
| | yes sometimes | 25 | 13 |
| | no | 68 | 35 |
| Physical Environment and Assistive Devices | | | |
| 1- Is the campus environment accessible for you (e.g., residential accommodation, indoors and outdoor facilities)? | most of the buildings | 10 | 5 |
| | yes but only some of the buildings | 84 | 44 |
| | no | 6 | 3 |
| 2- Is a special technology or assistive devices available to meet the needs of students with disabilities? | yes always | 8 | 4 |
| | yes sometimes | 17 | 9 |
| | no | 75 | 39 |

Table 1–(Continued).

| Domain/Item | Item's Response | Percentages (%) | Frequencies |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Staff | | | |
| 1- Are teaching and administrative staff adequately equipped and trained to deal with students with disabilities? | yes always | 6 | 3 |
| | yes sometimes | 15 | 8 |
| | no | 79 | 41 |
| 2- Do you experience any attitudinal barriers within the Institution? | yes always | 32 | 17 |
| | yes sometimes | 46 | 24 |
| | no | 22 | 11 |
| Reasonable Accommodation | | | |
| 1- How adequate are the reasonable accommodations that are provided to individual students with disabilities? | very adequately | 6 | 3 |
| | adequately | 29 | 15 |
| | inadequately | 52 | 27 |
| | very inadequately | 13 | 7 |
| Inclusion | | | |
| 1- Could the University do more to support the inclusion of students with disabilities? | yes definitely | 63 | 33 |
| | yes maybe | 25 | 13 |
| | no | 12 | 6 |
| 2- Do students without disabilities offer assistance when required to you? | yes always | 10 | 5 |
| | yes sometimes | 67 | 35 |
| | never | 23 | 12 |
| 3- Do you have more friends without disabilities than friends with disabilities on campus? | yes | 13 | 7 |
| | no | 87 | 45 |

Major Challenges and obstacles that faced by students with disabilities in the University

Responses to the open-ended question that asked participants about the major challenges and obstacles in the University were coded. These were then read and re read and themes were developed to reflect the nature of the responses. The main themes that represented the challenges and obstacles that faced by students with disabilities in the University were: (a) the issues of students with disabilities are still managed in a fragmented way with the Disability Office being reactive in their approach, strong policy frameworks are not in place or, alternatively, not known to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in the University; (b) funding for the activities of the Disability Office is very limited; (c) learning and assessment materials are not in accessible format in most courses; and (d) faculty staff and administrators in the University don't have enough awareness about disability issues and how to respond appropriately to the needs of the students.

Discussion

As the number of students with disabilities in higher education in Jordan has increased in recent years, it is a necessity to address their needs and demands at universities and colleges. Their access has been facilitated in part by the Law on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities for the year of 2007. The purposes of this study were to explore the obstacles to the inclusion of the students with disabilities and

make recommendations to enhance the quality of the learning experience of students with disabilities in a public University in Jordan.

Several interesting findings from the descriptive information of the participants and the survey questions were documented in this study. First of all, it would be easy to think that legislation in itself has created an environment that can accommodate the educational needs of students with disabilities in Jordan but this is not true. The law of education and higher education for students with disabilities needs to be enforced in Jordan. In fact, research by authors such as Barnes (2005) and Butterwick and Benjamin (2006) indicated that legislation alone is insufficient to effect change and thus a much more complex strategy of reviewing practices, procedures and active consultation of people with disabilities is required to work towards a fairer higher education.

The results of this research indicated that: (a) students with hidden disabilities (eg., specific learning disability, emotional disturbance, communication disorders) were not represented in the university; (b) the percentage of students with disabilities compared to their non-disabled counterparts is very low; (c) students with disabilities are not familiar with Law on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities for the year of 2007; (d) students with disabilities do not have all the necessary resources to meet their study needs; (e) students with disabilities are not satisfied with the support that provided by the Student Disability Office and designated resources in the University; (f) most, but not all, of the buildings are accessible for students with disabilities; (g) assistive devices are not available for most of the students with disabilities; (h) teaching and administrative staff are not trained to deal with students with disabilities; (i) most of the students with disabilities consider that the reasonable accommodations that are provided to them are inadequate to address their needs in learning and assessment in the University; (j) although students with disabilities are studying in an integrated higher education institution, inclusion is not practiced properly in the University where the research was undertaken. Same findings were documented by the students with disabilities when they responded to the open-ended question that addressed their major challenges and obstacles in the University. These results are in line with previous research that identified the educational, social, and environmental problems that the students with disabilities would encounter at the university besides the lack of tradition in higher education for accommodating students with disabilities (Alqaryouti, 2010; Barnes, 2005; Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006; Fuller et al., 2004; Hougann, 1987; Masaedeh, 1995; Riddell et al., 2005; Schmidt & Cagran, 2008).

In terms of the very low percentage of representation for students with disabilities in the University, this may be due to the fact that it is easier for the educational system in Jordan to identify students with severe disabilities and sensory impairments using the medical approach than identifying students with learning disabilities or mild disabilities. In consequence, student with learning disabilities or mild disabilities are rarely diagnosed and do not receive the necessary assessment and interventions in the general and higher education system of Jordan. Approximately 90% of the population of students with disabilities has learning disabilities, intellectual impairments, emotional disabilities, or communication disorders. Since all these students were excluded from the admission of the University, it was expected that the number of students with disabilities in the University would be very low.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommended the following: (a) considering students with disabilities needs in all discussions of physical estates, teaching, learning and assessment and admissions, as well as raising awareness among all institutional staff of the needs of students with disabilities; (b) providing assistive tools which would help students with disabilities in getting the required information from courses and libraries; (c) providing the teachers who might teach students with disabilities with enough information about these students, the assistive tools they need and the alternative assessment that teachers need in their evaluation; (d) hiring qualified staff in the Disability Office that recognizes students' needs and making the University staff more aware of the difficulties that their students with disabilities encounter; and (e) establishing an advisory group at University level to prepare information, organize training, collect information, and produce reports about students with disabilities.

In conclusion, students with disabilities present a challenge to higher education staff to question conventional concepts about teaching and learning. If higher education takes up the challenge, then this could represent a significant improvement in practice for all students. Until institutions consult their students with disabilities directly they will remain ignorant of the difficulties and barriers faced by students with disabilities in daily studying at colleges and universities. They will not know which areas need particular attention or development and members of staff remain unaccountable for their practice.

The difficulties faced by students with disabilities provide a catalyst that enables the least effective parts of higher education to be more clearly seen.

Limitations and Future Research

Generalizations from the experiences of 52 students with physical, visual, and hearing impairments in a public University in Jordan must be treated with caution. It is unknown whether institutional differences occurred. Future studies should investigate possible institutional differences as well as obtain larger samples that represented all disabilities. However, in general there were more similarities in policy and provision for students with disabilities across types of higher education institutions in Jordan. A possible focus for further study is to explore how faculty, administrators, and leaders in higher education institutions can strengthen their awareness about students with disabilities and create activities to promote inclusion of all students. The researcher also recommended other researchers to study the counseling and psychological needs of the students with disabilities and the relationship between their self esteem and academic achievement. Finally, attitudes of academic and other staff towards making accommodations for students with disabilities may be explored in future research.

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