

# Diagnosing the Social Inclusion Strategies for the Disabled Students at the Palestinian Higher Education Institutions

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines frameworks for understanding disability and their implications for practice. The functional limitations framework neglects the environment's role in worsening conditions, while the minority group paradigm can reinforce victim stereotypes. The social construction of disability emphasizes the social environment and aims to remove all barriers for inclusivity.

The research addresses the lack of clear strategies for promoting inclusivity for disabled students at Palestinian universities, comparing local strategies with European/international models. This study highlights often-overlooked fundamental rights of disabled students.

A questionnaire was distributed to 97 students with disabilities, and SPSS was used for analysis. Additionally, 20 students with disabilities and 20 experts in the field were interviewed, with thematic analysis applied. The study focused on four universities: Hebron, Bethlehem, Birzeit, and the Arab American – Jenin.

Findings reveal the lack of clear policies for disabled students in Palestinian higher education, with varying institutional support. Developing a comprehensive model for their needs, including early integration and infrastructure preparation, is essential. While there is general satisfaction among students with disabilities, there are significant differences in facilities provided by institutions. Financial aid and flexible teaching methods are generally positive, but awareness of job assistance post-graduation is low. Social inclusion efforts must address structural barriers and attitudes that perpetuate exclusion.

The study emphasizes the need for clear policies, strategies, and evaluations. Recognizing shortcomings and taking active steps to address them can lead to better integration and satisfaction for disabled students. Training and awareness for university staff can help create an inclusive culture in higher education.

**Keywords:** Disabilities, Palestinian institutions, higher education, social inclusion, strategies, policies, facilities, services, inclusive environment.

## المستخلص

تتناقش هذه الدراسة الأطر المختلفة لفهم الإعاقة وتأثيراتها على الممارسات العملية. يتجاهل إطار القيود الوظيفية دور البيئة في تفاعل الظروف، بينما قد يُعزز نموذج المجموعة الأقلية الصور النمطية للضحية. يركز مفهوم البناء الاجتماعي للإعاقة على البيئة الاجتماعية ويهدف إلى إزالة جميع الحواجز لتحقيق الشمولية.

يتناول البحث الافتقار إلى استراتيجيات واضحة لتعزيز الشمولية للطلاب ذوي الإعاقة في الجامعات الفلسطينية، ويقارن الاستراتيجيات المحلية مع النماذج الأوروبية والدولية. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على الحقوق الأساسية للطلاب ذوي الإعاقة التي غالبًا ما يتم تجاهلها.

تم توزيع استبيان على 97 طالبًا من ذوي الإعاقة، وتم استخدام برنامج SPSS لتحليل البيانات. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تم إجراء مقابلات مع 20 طالبًا من ذوي الإعاقة و20 خبيرًا في المجال، وتم تطبيق تحليل موضوعي للمقابلات. ركزت الدراسة على أربع جامعات: جامعة الخليل، جامعة بيت لحم، جامعة بيرزيت، والجامعة العربية الأمريكية - جنين.

كشفت النتائج عن عدم وجود سياسات واضحة للطلاب ذوي الإعاقة في التعليم العالي الفلسطيني، مع تفاوت في الدعم المؤسسي المقدم. يعد تطوير نموذج شامل لتلبية احتياجاتهم، بما في ذلك الدمج المبكر وتحضير البنية التحتية، أمرًا ضروريًا. وبينما يعبر الطلاب ذوو الإعاقة عن رضا عام، هناك اختلافات كبيرة في التسهيلات التي تقدمها المؤسسات. تعتبر المساعدات المالية وطرق التدريس المرنة إيجابية بشكل عام، لكن الوعي بمساعدة التوظيف بعد التخرج منخفض. يجب أن تعالج جهود الإدماج الاجتماعي الحواجز الهيكلية والمواقف التي تعزز الإقصاء.

تؤكد الدراسة على الحاجة إلى سياسات واستراتيجيات وتقييمات واضحة. إن الاعتراف بالنواقص واتخاذ خطوات فعالة لمعالجتها يمكن أن يؤدي إلى دمج أفضل وزيادة الرضا لدى الطلاب ذوي الإعاقة. يمكن أن يساعد تدريب الموظفين في الجامعات وزيادة الوعي في خلق ثقافة شاملة في التعليم العالي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الإعاقة، المؤسسات الفلسطينية، التعليم العالي، الإدماج الاجتماعي، الاستراتيجيات، السياسات، التسهيلات، الخدمات، البيئة الشاملة.

## Introduction

Higher education is a fundamental pillar in building the infrastructure for the development of countries and one of the essential reasons for their progress and prosperity (Nieminen, 2022). The right to education is a vital human right that should be exercised without distinction or discrimination, whether a person is incapacitated or not (Cole, 2022). International charters, agreements, and local legislations assert that education elevates society across various fields, contributing to progress and development (Al Jubeh, 2017). With the advent of technology, there is increasing recognition and awareness of the needs of persons with disabilities in higher education institutions to enable them to lead normal lives, pursue professions, and be active members of society, thereby achieving self-realization (Cinotti & Giulia, 2018).

The growing number of students with disabilities in higher education in Palestine underscores the need to make the system more inclusive, allowing active participation and integration (Khayran, 2019). The concept of justice in education is shifting from diagnosing disability, which emphasizes the individual's limitations, to an educational perspective that focuses on the system's ability to integrate all students equally (Snounu, 2019). UNESCO (2005) defines inclusion in education as a process of building the system's capacities to reach all learners. Inclusive education is a continuous process aiming to provide quality education for all, recognizing individual differences as opportunities to enrich the learning process (Albadawi, 2022).

Intercultural communication, a discipline studying communication across different cultures, plays a crucial role in this inclusion. It aims to understand how people from various backgrounds act, communicate, and perceive the world (Lauring, 2011). Understanding intercultural communication enhances personal and social interactions and resolves misunderstandings (Issa, 2016). Social inclusion, as defined by the World

Bank (2013), involves improving the terms on which individuals and groups participate in society, enhancing their ability, opportunity, and dignity (Bogart et al., 2022).

Social inclusion explicitly refers to individuals disadvantaged based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, or economic status. Strategies for achieving social inclusion involve addressing social exclusion by removing barriers and taking active steps to facilitate participation (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016). The United Nations' 2030 Agenda emphasizes social inclusion, aiming to include all irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic status (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016).

### **Statement of the Problem**

This research seeks to diagnose social inclusion strategies for disabled students at Palestinian higher education institutions and the extent to which they meet the needs of disabled individuals, including physical environments, tools provided, and attitudes of students and instructors. There are no clear strategies or plans to incorporate them into almost all universities. Inclusion policies are not clearly adopted, which is an obstacle. Despite local and international legislations guaranteeing the right to education for persons with disabilities, many do not have the opportunity to receive or complete their education, limiting their chances of completing higher education.

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2019), there are approximately 93,000 people with disabilities in Palestine, constituting 2.1% of the total population. More than onethird of persons with disabilities (10 years and over) are illiterate, and about 46% of children with disabilities aged 6-17 are not enrolled in education. The increase in disability numbers in higher education requires making the educational system more inclusive to incorporate them into the educational process.

Persons with disabilities face numerous obstacles in exercising their rights, including social barriers of discrimination and lack of physical aids. The Palestinian Authority's commitment to addressing these issues, expressed by signing the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014, has not fully translated into improved conditions, especially in educational settings. Several non-governmental organizations link the decay of disabled rights in Palestine to Israeli violations, economic crises, and weak legal frameworks. Strengthening the roles of persons with disabilities in the community ensures a healthier, equitable environment for everyone.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The research aims to diagnose the social inclusion strategies for disabled students. Specifically, the objectives are to:

1. Identify existing social inclusion strategies for disabled students at Palestinian higher education institutions.
2. Examine the applicability of these strategies.
3. Compare the social inclusion strategies at Palestinian higher education institutions with international/European models.

4. Recommend a model of social inclusion for application in Palestinian higher education institutions.
5. Highlight the facilities/services provided by higher education institutions for disabled students.

### Research Questions

Main question: What are the existing social inclusion strategies for disabled students?

Sub-questions:

1. What are the existing social inclusion strategies at Palestinian higher education institutions?
2. What is the extent of applicability of these strategies?
3. How do Palestinian social inclusion strategies compare with international/European models?
4. What is a recommended model of social inclusion for Palestinian higher education institutions?
5. What facilities/services do Palestinian higher education institutions provide for disabled students?

### Hypotheses

1. There is a lack of specific social inclusion strategies and policies in Palestinian higher education institutions.
2. There is a lack of application of social inclusion strategies and policies on the ground.
3. There are significant disparities between social inclusion strategies at Palestinian higher education institutions and international/European models.
4. There is a lack of a suitable model of social inclusion for Palestinian higher education institutions.
5. There is a lack of facilities/services provided by Palestinian higher education institutions for disabled students.

### Significance of the Research

Understanding the social construction of disability can clarify why disabled individuals face discrimination and help raise awareness to eliminate negative attitudes (Logan & Bogart, 2022). Disabled students have rights and should not be discriminated against, as they are part of society and should fully participate. This research investigates the limitations faced by disabled students at Palestinian universities, focusing on factors affecting their inclusion, such as facility suitability and measures to integrate and encourage them.

By comparing and contrasting social inclusion strategies with international standards, especially

European ones, the research aims to benefit from successful models and recommend a model for Palestinian higher education institutions. The findings will serve as a reference

for policymakers to help institutionalize a national strategy for this marginalized segment, ensuring facilities and tools are available to meet their needs.

### Limitations of the Research

1. **Temporal Limitation:** The research is restricted to a two-month data collection period from 5/1/2023 to 15/3/2023.
2. **Spatial Limitation:** The research is restricted to four higher education institutions in Palestine: Bethlehem, Birzeit, Hebron, and Arab American University-Jenin.
3. **Topic Limitation:** The research focuses on socially excluded/marginalized students in higher education institutions.

### Operational Definitions

1. **Social Inclusion:** Improving the terms on which individuals and groups participate in society, enhancing their ability, opportunity, and dignity (World Bank, 2013).
2. **Inclusive Education:** A teaching approach that supports students of all backgrounds, abilities, and identities within the same learning environment, providing equal opportunities for learning and participation (UNESCO, 2009).
3. **Strategies of Social Inclusion:** Policies and strategies implemented at Palestinian higher education institutions addressing the issues and participation of disabled individuals and their actual application.
4. **The Disabled:** People with long-term impairments that hinder effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (National Survey of Disability, 2011).
5. **Palestinian Higher Education Institutions:** Universities and colleges in the West Bank, selected based on availability of information, geographical distribution, and representation of both old and new institutions.

## Theoretical Framework, Background, and Review of Related Studies

### Theoretical Framework

Disability definitions have often been framed by those without disabilities, leading to a narrow perspective that fails to capture the full experience of people with disabilities (Fine & Asch, 1988). Disability is often defined in opposition to ability, positioning those with disabilities as different from those without (Scheer, 1994). To address this, new frameworks are needed to challenge stereotypes and shift perspectives on disability.

Jones (1996) identifies three prevalent theoretical frameworks addressing students with disabilities: the functional limitations framework, the minority group paradigm, and the social constructivism approach. The functional limitations framework focuses on individuals and their disabling conditions, emphasizing biological factors and often

ignoring environmental contributors (Hahn, 1991; 1998). This model justifies the status quo and focuses on rehabilitation, overlooking the diverse experiences and responses to limitations (Fine & Asch, 1988).

The minority group paradigm views disability through the lens of marginalization, alienation, and discrimination, acknowledging environmental factors and differential power structures (Jones, 1996). However, this model can reinforce stereotypes and justify segregation, treating students with disabilities as victims in need of support (Hahn, 1988; Jones, 1996).

The social construction of disability framework expands analysis to include both disabled and non-disabled people, challenging assumptions and celebrating individual differences while emphasizing social change (Asch & Fine, 1988; Trickett et al., 1994). This approach distinguishes between biological factors and social environments, promoting new understandings of disability as a social construction shaped by interactions with the environment (Gergen, 1985; Rollins, 1991).

These frameworks have implications for practice, particularly in designing successful programs and services for students with disabilities. The SPAR model (services, programs, advocacy, research) developed by Jacoby and Girrell (1981) emphasizes the responsibility of all student affairs units to provide suitable services and create opportunities for interaction among students with disabilities (Jacoby, 1993). Advocacy involves learning about common needs and issues, raising awareness, and creating conditions for institutional change. Understanding disability as a continually transforming process requires analyzing the quality of interaction with the campus environment, recognizing the power of environmental and cultural definitions (Jones, 1996; Fine & Asch, 1988).

Shakespeare (1996) discusses identity in disability debates, noting two uses of identity: identifying as uncovering disabled people and self-identification as a sense of belonging to a collective. He highlights two main approaches to defining disability: the medical model, focusing on impairment, and the socio-cultural model, viewing disability as a social process. Social constructivism emphasizes celebrating differences and challenging traditional definitions (Shakespeare, 1996).

Developing a positive disability identity involves overcoming internalized oppression and isolation (Freire, 1972; Morris, 1991). Shakespeare (1996) emphasizes the importance of selforganization and direct action in fostering positive self-identification and collective power. Disability culture and arts contribute to building a shared cultural identity, enhancing confidence, and promoting social change (Vasey in Lees, ed., 1992; Morrison & Finkelstein, 1992).

Ken Plummer (1995) suggests that storytelling is crucial for building communities and common perceptions, highlighting the importance of having spaces for people with disabilities to share their narratives. Recognizing differences and providing a platform for their voices is essential for fostering understanding and inclusion (Shakespeare, 1996).

## Background

Disability is increasingly recognized as a facet of social diversity, reflecting societal development and acceptance. Mitra and Yap (2021) argue that the way societies handle disability mirrors their progress and embrace of diversity. Globally, approximately 15% of the population has a disability, with most living in developing countries. Despite this, labor force participation remains low, with less than half of working-age individuals with disabilities being economically active.

The situation in Palestine is unique due to the ongoing occupation, which has resulted in many disabilities from repeated aggression. The Palestinian territories, divided into the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, face varied economic, social, and political challenges. Rehabilitation services are primarily provided by civil society institutions. Although Palestine has laws for the rights of persons with disabilities based on its constitution, alignment with the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified in 2014, has been hindered by the absence of a legislative body.

The Disabled Rights Law No. 4/99 defines disability broadly, encompassing congenital and noncongenital impairments affecting physical, psychological, or mental capabilities. The prevalence of disability in Palestinian territories ranges from 2.7% to 7%, with higher rates among the elderly. Physical disabilities are the most common, followed by slow learning disabilities. Illness is the leading cause of disability, and 87.3% of people with disabilities do not work. Additionally, 37.6% of individuals with disabilities have never enrolled in education, with significant disparities across regions.

Legislation mandates accessibility adaptations in public spaces, but enforcement is weak. The Palestinian Engineers Syndicate has developed training for inclusive design, yet practical implementation lags. Public transportation remains largely inaccessible, and emergency plans often overlook the needs of disabled individuals. While sign language has been introduced in some public services, broader implementation is needed.

Education rights for individuals with disabilities are outlined in Law No. 4/99, advocating for equal opportunities and necessary accommodations. Around 7,552 students with disabilities are integrated into public schools, yet many facilities lack adequate adaptations. Universities provide some accommodations, but more improvements are necessary. Employment provisions mandate a 5% quota for disabled individuals, but data on employment rates is sparse. Health rights include free services and early detection, though the Ministry of Health's criteria for health insurance eligibility are restrictive.

The Supreme Council for Persons with Disabilities was established to oversee law implementation, strategize policies, and evaluate achievements. However, its effectiveness is hampered by limited capacity and its subordination to the Ministry of Social Development. The General Union of Persons with Disabilities has also seen a decline in its influence.

Recent efforts by the Ministry of Social Development include the activation of the Supreme Council and the National Committee for Persons with Disabilities. Despite

these steps, investment in strategic frameworks and conference outputs remains insufficient. Moving towards a developmental approach aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires enhanced implementation and enforcement mechanisms to ensure meaningful progress for persons with disabilities in Palestine.

## Review of Related Studies

### Local and Arab Studies

A significant body of research has explored the experiences of disabled students in Palestinian universities, with a focus on their satisfaction with existing services rather than on public policies or their implementation. Abu'Ida (2017) investigated satisfaction levels among disabled students across five Palestinian universities: Birzeit University, Al-Quds University, Bethlehem University, Hebron University, and Al-Quds Open University in Ramallah. The study, which involved 129 students with various disabilities, revealed that while social and academic services, university facilities, information resources, and library services were rated highly, counseling, registration, and administrative facilities received moderate ratings. Notably, disparities favoring students with hearing and physical disabilities were observed. Bethlehem University consistently received higher satisfaction ratings except for university facilities, where Al-Quds Open University's Ramallah branch excelled.

Abu Shkheidem and Ishtia (2020) focused on An-Najah National University, surveying 30 disabled students to assess the availability of environmental assistance. The findings indicated a generally high level of environmental support, though there were notable differences based on gender, disability type, and academic level. Male students, those with hearing disabilities, and undergraduates reported higher levels of satisfaction.

Al-Rimawi (2021) examined the necessary adaptations for students with disabilities at Al-Quds and Bethlehem universities. Using a sample of 50 students, the study identified significant variations in required adaptations based on disability type, with visual impairments receiving more attention. Contrary to Abu'Ida's findings, Al-Rimawi suggested that similar adaptations were needed across universities due to the age of the buildings. The study highlighted the necessity for better adaptation practices, particularly for students with hearing and physical disabilities.

Simadi and Alqaryouti (2017) extended the scope to the broader Middle East, surveying 251 disabled students from Oman, Qatar, Jordan, and Yemen. Their analysis identified social satisfaction as the highest, followed by psychological, educational, environmental, and health satisfaction. They also found that socio-demographic factors, except gender and disability degree, significantly influenced satisfaction levels, with Jordanian and Qatari students reporting higher educational and psychological satisfaction compared to their Omani and Yemeni counterparts.

In Jordan, Al-Mekdad and Al-Qatawneh (2018) assessed the satisfaction of 57 disabled students at Mu'tah University. Their study highlighted high ratings for administrative services, infrastructure, and transportation, though academic services were rated only

moderately. No significant differences in satisfaction based on disability type were observed.

Elhadi (2021) investigated the challenges of including disabled students in mainstream education in Egypt. The study identified several barriers, including inadequate teacher training, construction limitations, and a lack of coordination among ministries. Recommendations included improving teacher training in inclusive education, adopting new policies, and ensuring that school facilities meet the needs of all students with disabilities.

### Foreign Studies

Salmi and D'Addio (2021) reviewed global policies aimed at achieving inclusion in higher education. They noted significant disparities in equity promotion across regions and countries. Their findings underscored the importance of comprehensive, well-resourced policies and longterm commitments to address both financial and non-monetary barriers. Effective equity promotion requires a national commitment to eliminating disparities and ensuring continuous support.

Moriña (2017) explored inclusive education challenges and opportunities within higher education. The study emphasized the need for accessible university spaces, support during students' initial transition periods, and faculty training in inclusive pedagogy. Moriña advocated for a university environment where policies and practices are tailored to ensure full participation and benefit for all students.

Márquez and Melero-Aguilar (2022) examined faculty knowledge and beliefs about inclusive education through semi-structured interviews with 119 faculty members from ten Spanish universities. The study revealed varied understandings of inclusive education among faculty members and recommended ongoing, discipline-specific training and dialogue to enhance the implementation of inclusive practices.

In conclusion, the reviewed studies indicate that the implementation of policies for disabled students in higher education remains an ongoing process, marked by significant disparities between regions and institutions. Effective inclusion requires more than just financial support; non-monetary interventions, such as outreach, affirmative action, and specialized services, are crucial. Pretraining and in-training of faculty members, as well as tailored support for disabled students during their initial university years, are essential components of a successful inclusion strategy.

The literature reveals variability in satisfaction among disabled students concerning the facilities and services provided by higher education institutions. In Palestine, there is a pressing need for realistic policy implementation and stakeholder commitment to address these gaps. The establishment of well-defined policies and practical solutions, beyond financial considerations, is vital for ensuring equitable education. Future research should focus on the effectiveness of existing policies and explore potential improvements to better meet the needs of disabled students.

## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology involved a comprehensive review of recent literature on disability, coupled with analysis from conferences, seminars, symposiums, and workshops. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods, including a structured questionnaire and interview questions, reviewed and validated by five experts in the field. The research focused on students with disabilities and experts in the field of disability and inclusion.

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS software. The research utilized Cochran's (1977) equation to determine the sample size for students with disabilities. Given a population of 152 students, the initial sample size was targeted at 80 students, providing a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 7.6%.

### Population and Sample

The study targeted disabled students across four Palestinian universities: Arab American University, Hebron University, Birzeit University, and Bethlehem University. A total of 97 questionnaires were distributed, and 20 students were interviewed. Additionally, 20 experts from academic institutions, government bodies, and NGOs were interviewed.

### Data Collection Tools

The primary tools for data collection included:

- Observation: Conducted through interviews and on-campus facility assessments.
- Questionnaires and Interview Questions: Developed in Arabic to avoid language barriers and validated by experts.

### Validity and Expert Review

The validity of the research instruments was ensured through expert review by a jury comprising five specialists in disability. Their feedback led to several amendments, including:

- Adding questions to improve response credibility.
- Reducing the number of questions for experts for clarity.
- Shifting some questions to interviews for direct responses.
- Merging questions for clarity and conciseness.
- Adjusting wording for direct answers.

□

## Procedures

**Data Collection** Data was collected through structured questionnaires and interviews conducted between January 5, 2023, and March 15, 2023. The questionnaires were distributed electronically via Google Forms, achieving a 6.0% margin of error.

Interviews with students and experts were conducted within the same period to address the research questions comprehensively.

**Data Examination** Data from questionnaires and interviews were analyzed to assess the services provided to disabled students and the applicability of social inclusion strategies. Thematic qualitative analysis was performed on the following themes:

1. Existing social inclusion strategies and policies.
2. Applicability of these strategies.
3. Comparison of Palestinian strategies with international models.
4. Proposals for a social inclusion model for Palestinian institutions.
5. Facilities and services provided by institutions.

### **Institutional Analysis**

#### **Hebron University:**

- **Population:** 22 students with disabilities.
- **Issues:** Lack of supportive services, inadequate physical facilities, high educational costs, and unsatisfactory teaching methods.
- **Facilities:** Limited to Braille printers and social/psychological counseling. No consistent policy for facility construction.

#### **Bethlehem University:**

- **Population:** 36 students with disabilities.
- **Issues:** Negative attitudes, transportation difficulties, and accessibility issues.
- **Facilities:** Well-equipped new buildings, a Resource Center, and various supportive services including a Braille printer and extra exam time.

#### **Birzeit University:**

- **Population:** 91 students with disabilities.
- **Issues:** Non-integration in activities, lack of elevators/ramps in older buildings, no specific policy for disabilities.
- **Facilities:** Basic supportive services including Braille printers and magnifying devices.

#### **Arab American University – Jenin:**

- **Population:** 5 students with disabilities.
- **Issues:** Outdated computers, lack of Braille books, and insufficient supportive services.
- **Facilities:** Limited to a social/psychological counseling office and no policy for facility construction.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Reliability of the Questionnaire

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, resulting in a coefficient of 0.90. This high value indicates a high level of internal consistency, making the questionnaire a reliable tool for evaluating social integration strategies.

### Distribution of Disabled Students Across Universities

The distribution of students with disabilities among the universities is as follows:

- **Bethlehem University:** 25 (25.8%) □ **Hebron University:** 15 (15.5%) □  
**Arab American University:** 12 (12.4%)
- **Birzeit University:** 45 (46.4%)

### Analysis by University

#### Bethlehem University

- **Services Provided:** Mean = 3.23 (Average)
- **Facilities Provided:** Mean = 3.53 (Average)
- **Functional Limitations Framework:** Mean = 2.42 (Average) □ **Minority Group Model Framework:** Mean = 2.72 (Average) □ **Social Construction Framework:** Mean = 3.44 (Average)
- **Total Degree:** Mean = 3.16 (Average)

The results indicate that services and facilities provided are rated at an average level. The functional limitations framework and minority group model are also rated average, while the social construction framework is slightly higher.

#### Hebron University

- **Services Provided:** Mean = 1.64 (Low)
- **Facilities Provided:** Mean = 2.40 (Average)
- **Functional Limitations Framework:** Mean = 2.53 (Average) □ **Minority Group Model Framework:** Mean = 3.08 (Average) □ **Social Construction Framework:** Mean = 3.58 (Average)
- **Total Degree:** Mean = 2.40 (Average)

Hebron University shows a low rating for services provided, whereas other aspects are rated at average levels. The social construction framework is notably higher compared to other categories.

### Arab American University

- **Services Provided:** Mean = 2.48 (Average)
- **Facilities Provided:** Mean = 2.90 (Average)
- **Functional Limitations Framework:** Mean = 1.63 (Low) □ **Minority**
- **Group Model Framework:** Mean = 2.69 (Low) □ **Social** **Construction**
- **Framework:** Mean = 2.81 (Average)
- **Total Degree:** Mean = 2.55 (Average)

The Arab American University scores average in services, facilities, and social construction frameworks but low in the functional limitations framework and minority group model.

### Birzeit University

- **Services Provided:** Mean = 3.41 (Average)
- **Facilities Provided:** Mean = 3.54 (Average)
- **Functional Limitations Framework:** Mean = 2.61 (Average) □ **Minority**
- **Group Model Framework:** Mean = 2.81 (Average) □ **Social** **Construction**
- **Framework:** Mean = 3.42 (Average)
- **Total Degree:** Mean = 3.26 (Average)

Birzeit University shows average ratings across all categories, reflecting a generally consistent level of social integration strategies.

**Results** highlight significant differences as identified by the Tukey test, showing that:

- **Bethlehem University** provides superior services compared to Hebron and Arab American universities.
- **Arab American University** shows better services compared to Hebron University, and Birzeit University provides better services than both Hebron and Arab American universities in the functional limitations framework.
- **Facilities** are better at Bethlehem and Birzeit universities compared to Arab American University.
- **Social Construction Framework** ratings are higher at Bethlehem and Birzeit universities compared to Hebron and Arab American universities.
- **Total Degree** is higher at Bethlehem and Birzeit universities compared to Hebron and Arab American universities.

### Summary

The analysis reveals notable differences in social integration strategies for students with disabilities across the four universities. Bethlehem University generally provides better services and facilities compared to the other universities, especially in the context of social construction frameworks. Birzeit University also performs well, particularly in

facilities and overall total degree, whereas Hebron and Arab American universities tend to score lower, particularly in services and specific frameworks.

The findings highlight the need for targeted improvements in social integration strategies, particularly at Hebron and Arab American universities, to enhance the support provided to students with disabilities.

### **Results and Analysis of Experts' and Students with Disabilities' Interviews**

This section synthesizes the findings from interviews conducted with experts and students with disabilities across four Palestinian universities. The analysis is organized around key themes derived from the research questions and contextualized within relevant theoretical frameworks and literature.

#### **Availability and Implementation of Inclusion Policies**

The interviews reveal a fragmented landscape regarding the availability and implementation of inclusion policies for students with disabilities in Palestinian higher education institutions. Experts generally agreed that formal, systematic policies are lacking. Khalil Alawne, Head of the Special Education Institutions Department at the Ministry of Education, and Mr. Nizar Basalat, Head of the Planning and Policy Making Unit at the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports, both highlighted a significant absence of cohesive, institutionalized policies, with any existing measures being sporadic and improvised. Alawne noted, "There are no policies or strategy adopted by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and applied to the Higher Education Institutions" (2023), which reflects a broader consensus among experts about the deficiencies in structured planning and implementation.

Conversely, some experts expressed uncertainty or contradicted this view. Hind Zahde, Head of the Disabled Resource Center at Bethlehem University, admitted a lack of awareness regarding government policies, while Mahmoud Amarneh, Head of the Counseling and Orientation Department, asserted the existence of clear policies at the Ministry level. This discrepancy underscores the uneven understanding and application of inclusion policies.

The theoretical framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly Article 32, emphasizes the need for inclusive development policies. This aligns with the findings of Salmi & D'Addio (2021), who argue that effective policies are crucial for fostering inclusion in higher education. Despite the conflicting views among experts, the literature suggests that the process of policy implementation for students with disabilities remains incomplete and inconsistent across various regions.

## Accommodation of Students with Disabilities

A stark contrast emerges when comparing the accommodation of students with disabilities between Palestinian and European higher education institutions. Experts highlighted that European institutions are guided by the principle of educational rights, ensuring inclusive practices backed by stringent laws. Bihan Qaimari, a special education professor, observed that European policies are rooted in the right to education, unlike the medical and charitable models prevalent in Palestinian institutions (2023). This reflects a broader consensus among experts that international institutions provide superior support and infrastructure for students with disabilities.

In contrast, Palestinian institutions, such as Hebron University and the Arab American University, are criticized for inadequate physical infrastructure, which hampers accessibility. For instance, Dina from Hebron University reported insufficient facilities, while Anas from the Arab American University highlighted the absence of essential amenities like elevators and ramps. This disparity is emblematic of a broader issue in Palestinian higher education, where the implementation of inclusive practices lags behind international standards.

The social construction of disability framework helps explain these findings by emphasizing the importance of removing societal and structural barriers to achieve full participation. Moriña (2017) and MacKenzie et al. (2020) argue that accessible environments are fundamental to inclusivity, a principle that is evidently more rigorously applied in European contexts compared to Palestine.

## Physical Infrastructure and Transportation

Physical infrastructure and transportation represent critical components of accessibility for students with disabilities. The interviews reveal a significant variance in the quality of physical environments across Palestinian universities. Birzeit and Bethlehem Universities were noted for their relatively better infrastructure, including elevators and ramps, which support mobility for students with disabilities. In contrast, Hebron and the Arab American Universities were criticized for their lack of adequate facilities.

Rasha from Birzeit University and Rama from Bethlehem University praised their campuses for meeting their needs, whereas Moath from Hebron University and Thaer from the Arab American University reported difficulties due to insufficient infrastructure. Shatha Abu Srouf, a disability and inclusion activist, stressed the necessity of a unified policy to ensure consistent accessibility across all institutions.

These findings align with the social construction of disability framework, which advocates for the removal of physical barriers to create inclusive environments. Abu'Ida (2017) supports this view, emphasizing that a fully accessible physical environment is essential for achieving equity in higher education.

## **University Environment and Educational Experience**

The quality of the university environment significantly impacts students' educational experiences. Most students reported positive experiences, particularly at Birzeit and Bethlehem Universities, where the environment was described as motivating and enriching. Suheir Najjar, Head of Disabilities Office at Birzeit University, emphasized that a supportive environment enhances educational experiences, a sentiment echoed by Nizar Basalat, who stressed the importance of considering the rights of disabled students.

However, Anas from the Arab American University reported a less supportive environment, indicating that while the opportunities were acceptable, they did not substantially enhance his educational experience. This variation underscores the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Elhadi (2021) highlights that a conducive university environment, including accessible facilities and supportive policies, is crucial for successful inclusion. Meeting the needs of students with disabilities through comprehensive services and facilities contributes to a positive educational experience, as confirmed by the interviews.

## **Financial Resources and Social Inclusion Programs**

Financial support and social inclusion programs are critical for enabling students with disabilities to participate fully in university life. Interviews revealed that while financial aid is generally available and beneficial, it is often dependent on external sources and voluntary efforts rather than integrated into institutional budgets. Rasha Saleh and Shatha Abu Srour highlighted the reliance on foreign funding and voluntary support, indicating a lack of sustainable, internal financial resources dedicated to disability services.

Simadi & Alqaryouti (2017) emphasize the importance of financial resources in implementing effective support programs. The lack of dedicated funding in Palestinian universities creates challenges for developing comprehensive programs and services, as noted by experts like Nizar Basalat and Rima Canawati.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable gap in career support for graduates with disabilities, with few institutions providing assistance in securing employment after graduation. This is contrary to international practices, where such support is integral to ensuring successful transitions into the workforce.

## **Teaching Methods, Specialized Tools, and Disabilities**

In Palestinian higher education institutions, the provision of flexible teaching methods and specialized tools for students with disabilities varies significantly. This study, drawing on interviews with students and experts, reveals a complex picture of satisfaction and challenges across four institutions: Birzeit University, Bethlehem University, Hebron University, and the Arab American University.

**Teaching Methods:**

Flexible teaching methods are acknowledged as a positive aspect across the institutions. Students at Birzeit and Bethlehem Universities, such as Bayan and Rajeh, report high satisfaction with the flexibility and cooperation of instructors. Conversely, students at Hebron University, like Dina, express moderate satisfaction, indicating that while cooperation exists, it is not uniformly experienced. Mohammad from the Arab American University notes general satisfaction tempered by limitations.

Experts, including Rima Canawati, argue that many teaching methods fail to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Kareemeh Shweiki, Head of the Blind Charitable School, highlights a lack of flexibility at Hebron University, exacerbating challenges faced by students there. This feedback aligns with the minority paradigm framework, which stresses the need to address barriers to achieve full equality and inclusion for individuals with disabilities.

**Specialized Tools:**

The availability of specialized tools also varies. At Birzeit and Bethlehem Universities, students report adequate access to technological devices and assistive tools such as Braille devices and recorders. Amani from Birzeit University and Sahar from Bethlehem University both emphasize that these resources are instrumental in facilitating their learning experiences.

In contrast, Hebron University students, like Dina, face significant deficits in specialized tools. Dina describes a lack of essential devices and support services, which hinders her educational experience. Thaer from the Arab American University notes some availability of tools but highlights the need for updates, especially concerning computers and printers. Experts, including Khalil Alawne and Mahmoud Atshan, underscore the importance of providing such tools to ensure the integration of students with disabilities into academic life.

The minority group paradigm framework and research by Al-Mekdad & Al-Qatawneh emphasize the necessity of these resources to enable full participation and integration.

**Emotional Support and Changing Attitudes:**

The responsibility for changing negative attitudes towards students with disabilities is perceived differently across institutions. Students at Hebron and the Arab American University believe it is a collective responsibility involving the individual, family, community, and media. Conversely, students at Birzeit and Bethlehem Universities feel that individuals with disabilities should lead efforts to alter negative perceptions.

Experts, including Rasha and Shatha Abu Srour, agree on the need for active efforts to combat negative attitudes, though there is some debate about who should lead these changes. There is a consensus that universities and students both play significant roles in altering stereotypical negative images.

The minority group paradigm framework highlights how negative attitudes and stigmatization contribute to social exclusion, while the social construction of disability framework stresses that societal attitudes and practices shape the experiences of individuals with disabilities. This underscores the importance of addressing both tangible and intangible barriers to achieve full inclusion.

### **Institutional Structure:**

The presence and effectiveness of specialized units or centers dedicated to supporting students with disabilities vary. At Birzeit and Bethlehem Universities, students like Bayan and Jiries report that these centers provide essential services and support, including financial aid and activities. However, Thaer from the Arab American University and Dunya from Hebron University express dissatisfaction with the lack of adequate specialized facilities.

Experts such as Bihan Qaimari and Hind Zahde emphasize the critical role of specialized units in facilitating the needs of students with disabilities. These units are crucial for implementing inclusive policies and ensuring that facilities are accessible to all students.

The social construction of disability framework suggests that institutional practices and policies shape the experiences of individuals with disabilities. A well-resourced specialized unit can significantly enhance the inclusivity of higher education institutions, aligning with the minority group paradigm that highlights the need for comprehensive support to ensure full participation.

## **Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Discussion: Expert Interviews**

The study highlights a significant shortfall in higher education institutions' support for students with disabilities. A notable deficiency is the lack of clear policies and strategies tailored to this group, compounded by inadequate evaluation of existing policies where they do exist. This gap is alarming, as access to education is a fundamental right for everyone, including those with disabilities. Only one expert noted that planning is done through a committee that includes individuals with disabilities, their families, and university administration, indicating a critical need for more inclusive planning processes.

All experts agreed on the necessity of a specialized unit within higher education institutions to address the needs of students with disabilities. This unit is essential for ensuring that the unique requirements of these students are met and that appropriate activities are provided. However, the current lack of adequate financial resources is a significant concern. The reliance on external funding, volunteer work, and special budgets for disability services underscores the need for more sustainable and integrated funding sources within the Ministry of Higher Education's general plans.

Experts also stressed the importance of both human and infrastructural resources to effectively implement policies and strategies for students with disabilities. While it is reassuring that institutions provide qualified and specialized staff, the adequacy of these resources remains unclear due to the absence of comprehensive policies.

Comparatively, Palestinian institutions lag behind European and international institutions, which have established clear policies and suitable infrastructure for students with disabilities. European models are more advanced, reflecting a shift from a medical and charitable approach to a more inclusive and rights-based framework. This disparity highlights the need for Palestinian institutions to adopt inclusive policies and integrate principles of justice and equality, ensuring that students with disabilities are afforded equal opportunities to succeed in higher education.

The study also underscores the need for greater focus on addressing the challenges faced by students with disabilities, including the development of awareness programs to change negative attitudes and creating programs tailored to their needs. The involvement of universities and students in changing stereotypes and promoting inclusivity is essential. Addressing negative attitudes, empowering students, and providing necessary support will contribute to their successful integration into academic communities.

### **Discussion: Student Interviews**

The study examined four Palestinian higher education institutions—Bethlehem University, Hebron University, the American University, and Birzeit University—and found significant differences in the facilities and services provided to students with disabilities. Bethlehem and Birzeit universities performed better in offering physical accessibility features such as elevators and ramps compared to Hebron University and the American University. Additionally, financial aid availability varied, with some students at Birzeit University reporting inadequate support.

Flexible teaching methods were positively rated across all institutions, and the registration departments were generally well-regarded. However, the provision of activities designated for students with disabilities varied significantly, with Bethlehem and Hebron universities offering more activities compared to others. Specialized tools and resources also differed, with Bethlehem and Birzeit universities providing a range of assistive technologies, while Hebron University lacked such resources.

The study found that most students felt they did not face significant challenges in accessing equal opportunities or services, though some reported negative educational experiences. The majority felt satisfied if their needs were met and actively participated in university life. The varying perceptions of the term "people with disabilities" and the responsibility for changing negative attitudes highlighted the need for greater awareness and education on disability issues.

The quantitative analysis, supported by a reliable questionnaire (Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.90), revealed significant variations in social integration strategies across universities.

Bethlehem University had higher scores in services and facilities for disabled students compared to Hebron University, which showed lower scores. The analysis also indicated that universities need to invest more in accessibility measures and adopt comprehensive approaches that address the unique needs of students with disabilities.

The ANOVA and Tukey tests revealed significant differences in social integration strategies among universities, with Bethlehem University generally performing better. The results emphasize the need for continued efforts to improve accessibility and support for disabled students across Palestinian higher education institutions. These findings can guide policymakers and university administrations in developing better strategies and practices to enhance the social integration and inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education. Further research is needed to explore the reasons behind these differences and to identify best practices for improving support for disabled students.

## Conclusion

This paper explored various theoretical frameworks for understanding disability and their practical implications, focusing on the functional limitations framework, the minority group paradigm, and the social construction of disability.

The **functional limitations framework** centers on individual impairments but neglects the impact of environmental factors on disability. The **minority group paradigm** addresses issues of marginalization and discrimination but can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes of disability and hinder collective action. In contrast, the **social construction of disability** framework emphasizes the role of societal structures in marginalizing individuals with disabilities, challenging traditional notions of disability and striving for an inclusive environment free from emotional, social, or physical barriers.

The SPAR model (Services, Programs, Advocacy, Research) proposed by Jacoby and Girrell (1981) evaluates the core functions of student affairs units from the perspective of students with disabilities. This model underscores the need for comprehensive service evaluation, advocacy, and institutional change. Two approaches to understanding disability are highlighted: the medical approach, which focuses on physical impairments, and the socio-cultural approach, which sees disability as a social construct. The socio-cultural model views disability as a relational dynamic between people with disabilities and a discriminatory society, aiming for full inclusion and a positive disabled identity.

The research highlights significant gaps in Palestinian higher education regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities. Many institutions lack clear policies, adequate resources, and evaluation mechanisms. The study reveals discrepancies between Palestinian and international institutions, with European institutions often having clearer policies and better resources for students with disabilities. Local institutions are generally characterized by ad hoc efforts and varying levels of support.

Bethlehem and Birzeit Universities are noted for their better facilities and services for students with disabilities compared to the American and Hebron Universities. There is a general lack of awareness among disabled students about post-graduation employment

assistance, and significant variability exists in the availability of specialized tools and support services across institutions.

### **Recommendations**

**Unified Higher Education Policy** It is recommended to establish a standardized policy for integrating students with disabilities across all Palestinian universities. This policy should be designed collaboratively by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and individual universities to ensure consistency and equity in implementation.

**Learning from International Models** Palestinian institutions should adopt best practices from international models while also leveraging successful local models, such as Bethlehem University's, to improve their own policies and strategies for disability inclusion.

**Improving Physical Accessibility** Universities must invest in enhancing the physical environment to ensure accessibility for all students with disabilities. This includes upgrading facilities and equipment to meet the diverse needs of students and creating a more supportive campus environment.

**Financial Assistance** It is crucial for universities to secure financial aid for students with disabilities and explore opportunities for additional funding from donors and government sources. Such financial support is essential for ensuring that students with disabilities can fully participate in university life.

**Flexible Teaching Methods and Specialized Programs** Universities should implement specialized programs and establish inclusion centers to address the academic and support needs of students with disabilities. These centers should focus on providing financial aid, specialized tools, and flexible teaching methods. Additionally, capacity building for staff and establishing connections with the labor market for post-graduation employment should be prioritized.

**Raising Awareness and Training** Raising awareness about disability issues and promoting positive attitudes within the university community is essential. Regular training for staff and the issuance of annual reports on disability and inclusion can help foster a more inclusive culture. Policies should be enacted to combat discrimination and ensure equal opportunities for all students.

Overall, the study underscores the need for a more coordinated and inclusive approach to disability in higher education institutions in Palestine. By adopting these recommendations, institutions can work towards a more equitable and supportive environment for students with disabilities, aligning with best practices both locally and internationally.

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