

## **Inclusive University Education for People with Disabilities: Unjust Barriers**

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"I do not see any justice in the idea that people with disabilities should endure the suffering I went through during my university studies".<sup>1</sup>

Rahaf Al-Masry

## Introduction

Infrastructure affects social well-being and access to basic education and health services. As such it becomes the backbone of economic growth and development. The achievement of nearly 80% of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is related to the quality and durability of the country's infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> The inability of any social group to access services, due to the absence of accessible infrastructure, heightens the risk of social exclusion, as its members become unable to participate and contribute to social and economic well-being and benefit from it.

The provision of appropriate infrastructure for persons with disabilities, who represent 13% of Jordanian society, according to the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Jordan,<sup>3</sup> is an important guarantee for their access to educational and health services, which enables them to participate effectively socially and economically. Of course, there are aspects other than the infrastructure that will enhance this participation of persons with disabilities, such as countering stigma, raising awareness, and strengthening the capacities of educational institutions to deliver inclusive education.

UNESCO defines inclusive education<sup>4</sup> as "securing and guaranteeing the right of all [children] with disabilities to access, attend, participate, and succeed in their local regular school. Inclusive education requires building the capacities of workers in neighborhood schools, and working to remove physical barriers and obstacles that may prevent access, attendance, and participation of persons with disabilities in order to provide quality education for all students and attain educational accomplishments in this field". Accordingly, inclusive education differs from special education, which isolates people with disabilities in "special classes" or educational institutions designated for them and deprives them of broad social interaction, and confines them to limited educational environments that consequently deprive them of quality educational experiences, on an equal basis with persons without disabilities.

This paper highlights the lack of adequate university infrastructure for inclusive education for students with disabilities. It focuses specifically on campus infrastructure. Our objective is to provide recommendations to the deanships of student affairs in these universities and activists in this field to alleviate the marginalization and exclusion that this group endures. This paper is based

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<sup>1</sup> Rahaf Al-Masri, a student at the University of Jordan with visual impairments. The interview took place on 12/28/2022.

<sup>2</sup> Wafa Ahmed Mahmoud Al-Omouh, "The Role of Infrastructure in Sustainable Development," Arab Journal for Scientific Publishing, Fifth Edition - Issue Forty-Nine, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3HuLkF7>

<sup>3</sup> Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, "Study: The percentage of persons with disabilities in Jordan is 13 percent," 2015 <https://bit.ly/3WIWLO1>

<sup>4</sup> Inclusive education: the way of the future, general presentation of the 48th session of the ICE, 2008. [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000161565\\_eng](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000161565_eng)

on the findings from a simple questionnaire administered during the time period from November 3 to November 11, 2022, with 50 male and female participants from the University of Jordan-Amman, the Hashemite University/Zarqa, and Al-Balqa Applied University/Al-Salt. The questionnaire included 13 male and 37 female students, 25 of whom were with physical disabilities, 20 were with visual disabilities, and the remaining five were those with hearing disabilities. Two cases were also interviewed to gain in-depth findings on the present gaps in educational institutions' implementation and compare it with Jordan's international commitments in this field.

### **Access to resources: right or privilege?**

Public policies for persons with disabilities have historically undergone developments as a result of the change in the understanding of disability, starting with the perception of disability as a problem that requires medical intervention; this vision progressed over time to a charity approach where persons with disabilities were perceived as a marginalized group that needs benevolence and kindness. More recent approach considers disability as a form of diversity and that access to facilities for persons with disabilities is a question of human right and a cause of justice.

Treating students with disabilities as having a "problem" and, therefore, in need of treatment, unfortunately affects the design of public policies around inclusive education. According to this approach, doctors, psychiatrists, and nurses have extensive power over persons with disabilities, and make decisions on their behalf in a belief that the medical treatment given or imposed on the "patient" can "fix the problem", to help the "patient" return to society and function more normally in life. Far from the aforementioned philanthropic approach, the current human rights approach upon which this paper is based considers access to resources a human right and not a privilege we bestow to groups and individuals.

The state of disability results from the lack of a community empowerment mechanism that removes environmental barriers so that persons with disabilities can interact.<sup>5</sup> This shift in looking at the real causes of disability makes us realize that the surrounding environment is the true subject of disability, and that the failure of institutions to accommodate people with disabilities is the real reason for exclusion. Hence, the interest in infrastructure on campus aims to enable society to remove barriers to inclusive education for persons with disabilities.

The rights of persons with disabilities in education: between promising texts and dismal realities

The Jordanian Constitution guarantees the right to education for all in Article (6) thereof. In Articles (6) and (7), it affirmed the right of people with disabilities to preserve their dignity and protect them "from abuse and exploitation, respect for dignity and autonomy," as "the state guarantees work and education within the limits of its capabilities, and guarantees reassurance and equal opportunities for all Jordanians." Article 7 specifically mentions vulnerable groups: "The law protects motherhood, childhood and old age, and takes care of young people and people with disabilities and protects them from abuse and exploitation".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Generations For Peace, The Parents-Teachers Cooperation Programme – Inclusive Education in Jordan (GIZ PROMISE), 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Constitution of Jordan, Prime Ministry <https://bit.ly/3kCPIZS>

Jordan sanctioned the International Convention for Persons with Disabilities<sup>7</sup> on March 31, 2008, declaring its "commitment to implement the provisions of this Convention in order to achieve its goal and purpose of protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and ensuring their full enjoyment of human rights and basic freedoms". Thus, Jordan affirmed its commitments at the local and international levels in this regard. At the same time, Jordan seeks to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2015-2030<sup>8</sup> in the fourth goal related to quality education, educating persons with disabilities, eliminating gender disparity in education and ensuring equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities by 2030, building educational facilities that take into account the needs of all children, especially children with disabilities, raising the level of existing educational facilities, and creating an effective and safe educational environment free of violence for all to improve the lives of persons with disabilities and achieve sustainable development.

Law No. (20) of 2017 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affirms the right to education and "prohibits the exclusion of a person with a disability from any educational institution on the basis of or because of disability". No party can ever waive their right to admission and integration into schools, and the inclusion of educational policies, strategies, plans and programs in education requirements for persons with disabilities. The objective is to achieve their full enjoyment of their right to education and access to all programs, services, facilities and educational institutions. This is stated in Articles (17), (18), (19) and (20) of the same law.

Although the Jordanian legislative texts and Jordan's international obligations explicitly adopt the term "inclusive education" and guarantee the right of persons with disabilities to education, practices, and implementation on the ground are not consistent with these obligations.

According to the population census of 2015, the Department of Statistics figures indicate that 79% of persons with disabilities do not receive any form of education. The statistics of the Ministry of Education confirm what is more alarming than this result; the number of persons with disabilities beneficiaries of educational services does not exceed 20 thousand male and female students, and this figure constitutes 9.1% of the total number of students in Jordan. Therefore, the vast majority of persons with disabilities of school age are completely outside the scope of educational institutions<sup>9</sup>.

This paper focuses on university education, but it is useful to note that the right to inclusive education is not limited to childhood. However, it is an unprotected right in schools and various educational facilities, as many students with disabilities face great challenges in accessing educational facilities. These facilities lack the necessary infrastructure, such as unaccessible entrances and special ramps designed with an inappropriate degree of curvature and the absence of supportive handles and warning and indicative signs, all of which pose great dangers to

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<sup>7</sup>Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, "International Convention for Persons with Disabilities", <http://hcd.gov.jo/en/news/international-convention-persons-disabilities-and-jordans-obligations>

<sup>8</sup>UNESCO [SDG 4: Education | Global Education Monitoring Report \(unesco.org\)](https://www.unesco.org/en/sdg/4)

<sup>9</sup>The Ten-Year Strategy for Inclusive Education (2019-2029), The Ministry of Education [https://moe.gov.jo/sites/default/files/the\\_10-year\\_strategy\\_for\\_inclusive\\_education\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://moe.gov.jo/sites/default/files/the_10-year_strategy_for_inclusive_education_0_0.pdf)

students with disabilities. On the other hand, the furniture in the classrooms in universities and schools, including laboratories, lacks appropriate dimensions and usages that consider the needs of students with disabilities.

### **Unjust obstacles and quasi-impossible access**

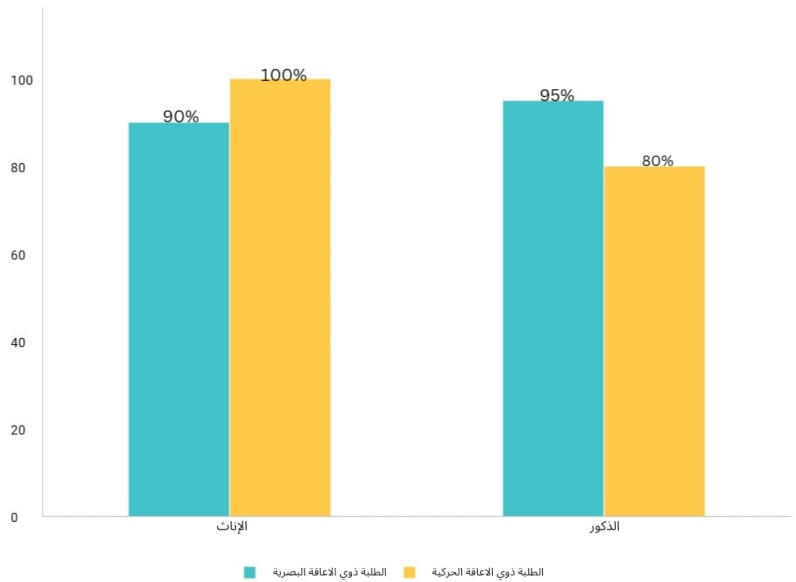
In order to clearly discuss the conditions of students with disabilities in universities, we decided to look at two cases that demonstrate the impact of university infrastructure and furniture shortage on their schooling. A university student born in 1992 who suddenly lost her sight in 2011 when she was 19 years old says:

"My life has changed completely. My need for a person to accompany me permanently has become urgent because there are no equipped facilities within the university that provide access to people with disabilities of any kind. There are no special passages for us to cross. If they exist, they are not marked and they are used by all students in campus. This is apart from the long distances between the classes buildings, which constitute an obstacle for us. The absence of toilets in the ground floors of educational buildings is another concern. Lack of any written instructions in Braille, even in the simplest forms, that help guide persons with disabilities without the need for the assistance of anyone is a major issue too. The combination of all these factors caused me permanent embarrassment and made me think a lot about dropping out of university. In the end, I think it is time to shed light on our issues and work to create an unhindered infrastructure because we are an integral part of Jordanian society, and I do not see justice in the idea that people with disabilities who enroll in universities suffer what I what I endured".<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, this student's experience is not not an exception. For example, the results of the questionnaire indicate that the vast majority of students face difficulty in accessing lecture halls on campus (Figure 1). The result is not much different concerning access to the most basic health services, such as toilets, as students of all categories of disabilities find it difficult to access them (Figure 2). Access to facilities such as bathrooms is considered the bare minimum for physical access:

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<sup>10</sup> Rahaf Al-Masri, a student at the University of Jordan with visual impairments, interviewed on 28/12/2022.



**\*\*Translation:**

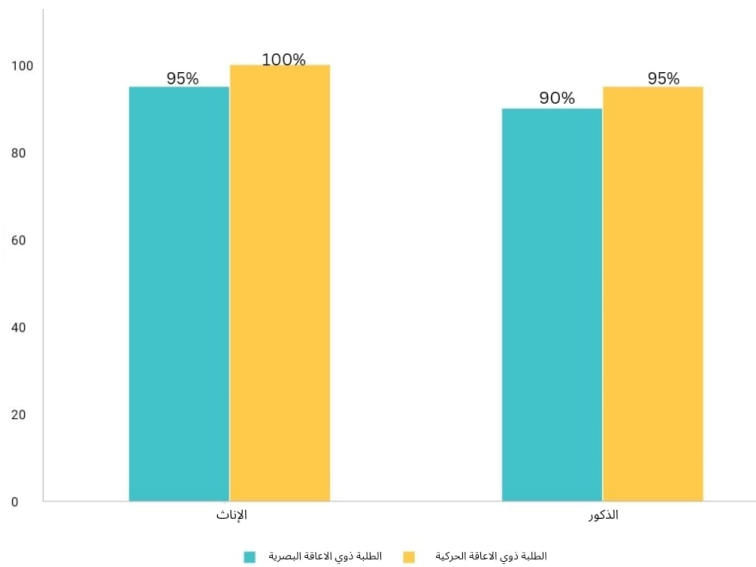
Females

Males

Students with mobility impairments

Students with visual impairments

Figure 1: Percentage of students with disabilities who have difficulty accessing lecture halls on campus



**\*\*Translation:**

Females

Males

Students with mobility impairments

Students with visual impairments

Figure 2: Percentage of students with disabilities who face difficulty in accessing toilets on campus

These results reflect the neglect that surrounds facilities that are equipped for persons with disabilities over long periods of time, which necessitates their rehabilitation with assistive arrangements and reasonable accommodations. This is not limited to educational facilities, but education is a basic right and the neglect of infrastructure is a significant barrier that limits the access of persons with disabilities to an inclusive educational experience.

The lack of elevators or bathrooms in some colleges within the university is one other problem facing this segment. This lack may force the student sometimes to carry their chair with them to the lecture hall on the upper floors, and this exposes them to high risks of falling and physical harm. In addition, there is risk of psychological damage as a result of being carried by colleagues. Another example of the challenges of the university environment is the furniture in the classrooms. There are no seats available for students who suffer from a defect in the spine or amputation of the right or left hand.

It is also noteworthy that the results of the questionnaire show the more profound impact of the lack of infrastructure in universities on female students. There are no adequate toilets for them, and it is difficult for them to seek help more than their male counterparts. Male students usually resort to carrying their fellow students with disabilities to reach the classrooms on higher floors, which is an option that is not necessarily available for female students, not to mention that it is an option that does not protect the dignity of students with disabilities in the first place. This exposes female students with disabilities to increased marginalization and greater deprivation of educational opportunities.

Jordanian Law No. 20 of 2017 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines these arrangements and accommodations as "necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments to enable students of all abilities to access and safely use resources, to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy or practice all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal footing as the others."<sup>11</sup>

Many buildings lack such arrangements. Bearing in mind that 2% of the buildings are equipped to serve persons with disabilities out of the total number in the Kingdom, yet these are not fully equipped.<sup>12</sup> The Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Jordan lists some of these challenges, and we chose to state below only those related to university education institutions:

- Absence of arrangements and facilities that ensure proper social adaptation for students with disabilities inside or outside the university campus, whether in regard to the relationship with colleagues or the relationship with faculty members and university employees<sup>13</sup>
- Challenges related to taking advantage of recreational activities and spending free time.

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<sup>11</sup> The Prime Ministry and the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Law No. 20 of 2017 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, previous reference.

<sup>12</sup> Bushra Nairoukh, Inclusive education requires a deep restructuring of the educational system, 2023. <https://bit.ly/3DcMiDk>

<sup>13</sup> Challenges facing students with disabilities at the University of Jordan: A field study, January 2016, Ibrahim A. Al-A'dra <https://journals.ju.edu.jo/DirasatHum/article/view/9770>

- The absence of specialists in the university to provide psychological and supportive help during the university experience.
- Using furniture with fixed specifications and height, and difficulty in reaching high places.

It is noticeable that the University of Jordan began to adapt the external environment within the university in stages. It included the construction of private corridors and the establishment of air-conditioned health facilities in many faculties at the university, with the efforts of the successive university administrations, the Student Counseling Department, the Community Service Office and other parties, to reduce and diminish these difficulties as much as possible. However, the age of some buildings sometimes prevents this, and work is still a process underway.<sup>14</sup>

The university has designed tables and chairs to suit the uses of people with mobility disabilities, and they have been distributed in all computer laboratories. It is noted here that there is still a need to construct corridors for this category in vital university buildings. Some need the necessary maintenance, in addition to the lack of handrails for protection in some corridors with stairs, which constitutes a danger for the blind student. Besides, some obstacles are present in many corridors inside the university, such as potholes, water drains, and tree branches, which impede the freedom of movement of these students, and this may be due to the age of most of these buildings and the lack of restoration. Poor funding and allocations for this purpose exacerbate these problems.

The problem is not limited to universities only. Ahmed, who was born without any disability in 1999, then left semi-paralysis in the lower part of his body due to a traffic accident in 2017, explains:

"It was not easy for me to accept it at first because of the great suffering I endured while doing the simplest tasks. The care in my university for people with disabilities is very bad in terms of public facilities, roads full of potholes and unpaved streets that make it difficult for a person who uses a wheelchair to move without the help of others. In addition, lack of elevators inside the buildings leading to the classrooms makes us feel constantly embarrassed and in need of continuous help from other students. Continuous encroachment on parking lots for people with disabilities adds to that as well".

The biggest reason here is lack of awareness, whether for individuals or society as a whole. Ignoring the right of persons with disabilities to access facilities and services in a smooth and safe manner is a joint responsibility of all parties. Alleviating the restrictions that impede their movement is a collective duty. He goes on to say, "I hope that the university will start paying attention to our facilities, restructuring the buildings, and educating students about the essence of inclusive education, which should be advocated and supported by civil society organizations and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education on an ongoing basis".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Challenges facing students with disabilities at the University of Jordan: A field study, January 2016, Ibrahim A. Al-A'dra <https://journals.ju.edu.jo/DirasatHum/article/view/9770>

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed Theeb, recently graduated from the Hashemite University of Jordan. The interview took place on 18/01/2023.



All in all, identifying the infrastructure challenges facing students with disabilities does not stop at universities and the Deanships of Student Affairs, but also requires a combined community effort to raise awareness among officials, decision-makers, and students about inclusive education and the rights of students with disabilities within campuses.

## **Recommendations**

- Encouraging the Ministry of Higher Education to adopt a national strategy for inclusive education similar to the strategy of the Ministry of Education,<sup>16</sup> in order to provide legislative and institutional cover that urges universities to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- The Ministry of Higher Education must follow an approach that obligates those responsible for creating university budgets to update and develop the infrastructure and furniture in classrooms to keep pace with the principles of Universal Design.
- The efforts of the Deanships of Student Affairs in Jordanian universities should join forces with the National Council for Persons with Disabilities to identify the needs of students according to the different types of disabilities, and to conduct a study on the most important challenges facing students.
- Work with the Ministry of Higher Education and some private sector companies through their social responsibility programs or with donors to provide the necessary budget to equip the university campus and provide suitable furniture for students with disabilities.
- That the concerned associations and activists in this field work to raise the awareness and understanding of faculty members and university employees about inclusive education in order to source the expertise that universities need in this field and achieve integration in the educational process.
- Preparing appropriate cultural, sports, and social activities that are accessible for students with disabilities, taking into account the type, place, and nature of their disabilities.
- The need to attract a group of supportive students and volunteers in order to help students with disabilities and implement programs to educate other students about their rights.

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<sup>16</sup> The Ten-Year Strategy for Inclusive Education (2019-2029), The Ministry of Education [https://moe.gov.jo/sites/default/files/the\\_10-year\\_strategy\\_for\\_inclusive\\_education\\_0\\_0.pdf](https://moe.gov.jo/sites/default/files/the_10-year_strategy_for_inclusive_education_0_0.pdf)



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من السفارة الأمريكية في الأردن.