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Accessible and Inclusive Higher Education for Palestinian Students with Disability: Policies and Practices Review

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Abstract

As a commitment to promoting social justice and building inclusive society, this study aimed to review Palestinian policies and practices that support the right of students different disabilities to access inclusive higher education (IHE). To achieve this aim, four data collection tools were used: email correspondence, two focus group discussions involving 38 participant students with visual, physical and hearing disability, six individual interviews with senior directors of disability care offices in PHEIs, and content analysis of 11 policy documents. The results showed absence of factual information about Palestinian students with disabilities, lack of support to adopting in IHE in almost all existing policies and strategic goals, a mixture of practices facilitating and hindering implementation of core elements of IHE, and experience-based policies and practices proposed by the participants to make higher education more accessible and inclusive. Before presenting the conclusions, the study offered recommendations for the inclusiveness of higher education.

Keywords: policies and practices, disability, inclusive higher education, access to higher education, Palestinian universities

Introduction

In recent years, several countries, including the State of Palestine, and numerous universities developed policies and used practices to make universities and colleges more inclusive and more accessible to people with disabilities (PWD). These policies and practices aimed to promote equity, equality, social justice and inclusive university community through supporting the right of PWD to quality inclusive higher education (IHE). These policies and practices showed an ethical institutional commitment to human rights expressed in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - Article 24.

In light of respecting these rights, more thorough context-based investigations of IHE policies and practices are needed to develop disabled students' sense of dignity, self-worth, 'personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential' (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2007). This human resource development would enable these students to be independent and self-sufficient (Black et al., 2015; Lyman et al., 2016; Marshak et al., 2010; Perry & Franklin, 2006, all cited in Toutain, 2019) and to be actively and equally productive citizens capable to contribute to the development and growth of their local community.

This promotion and commitment became apparent on the websites of numerous international universities to provide quality inclusive learning opportunities for all students. They covered the core elements of IHE. For example, the website of the University College London (UCL) included an online Inclusive Teaching Toolkit to ensure teaching provides opportunities for all students, using the available resources (University College London (UCL), 2022). Similarly, the University of Washington included guiding practices on inclusive teaching and assessment strategies, designing a course with inclusivity in mind, accessible teaching strategies, creating a respectful learning environment, and Strategies for engaging particular groups of students (University of Washington, 2022). Stressing the importance of reviewing and analysing the quality of policies and practices in relation to inclusion and the education of PWD, the University of Birmingham offers a postgraduate module titled 'Evaluation and Policy Analysis for Inclusive Education (University of Birmingham, 2023).

Concerning the research conducted with IHE, there were many studies review and analysed related policies (Albadawi, 2021; López Gavira & Moraña, 2015; May & Bridger, 2010; Mutanga & Walker, 2015; Walker, 2010) and practices that include several core IHE components: faculty members / professors (Moriña, 2017; Sánchez-Díaz & Morgado, 2021), teaching strategies and pedagogies (Ajisukmo, 2017; Bualar, 2018; Salha & Al-Badawi, 2021; Shaw, 2021; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021), curriculum design (Morgan & Houghton, 2011), assessment (Nieminen, 2022), learning environment (Hewett et al., 2017), content and quality of websites (Doush et al., 2020; Flink, 2019), and infrastructure (Ajisukmo, 2017). These international research concerns on the importance of studying IHE policies and practices were one part of the driving force for conducting this study in addition to several important contextual factors in relation to the reality of disabled Palestinians and the conflict-stricken and challenging context they live in: the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs), namely, the West Bank including Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

One factor is the scarcity of factual and statistical information (data) on disabled students enrolled at PHEIs and also 'very rare' studies that investigated the policies, practices and experiences of these students (Abdul-Samad, 2020; Al-Masri, 2021; Ramahi et al., 2021; Snounu et al., 2019). This substantial problem is expressed clearly by Snounu et al. (2019, p. 7): 'In Palestine, there is little data on disabled students in higher education' and was described as 'a vast disability data hole' and 'shamefully scant' by Walker et al. (2016).

A further factor is the focus of the research on disabled Palestinians in PHEIs exploring issues that focused mainly on attitudes and perception of students, academics and administrators towards students with disabilities (Gustafsson et al., 2019; Ramahi et al., 2021a; Snounu et al., 2019). Few studies compared PWD with Norwegian and American counterparts (Gustafsson et al., 2019). Few more studies investigated the impact of using assistive technologies on students with visual impaired enrolled (H. A. Elaydi & Shehada, 2007; H. Elaydi & Shehada, 2013) and evaluating the accessibility and inclusiveness of the home pages of all 18 Palestinian universities during COVID-19. (Doush et al., 2020)

An additional contextual factor is related to the rapid increase of the PWDs in the OPTs which reached to approximately 7%, according to the disability survey conducted by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) and the Ministry of Social Affairs in 2011. (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS),

2011). One example of this increase is the big jump in mobility disability which represents about 50% of all disabilities in the OPTs which was almost doubled from 3.7% (in 2007) to 6.8% in 2017 for two reasons: 1) the three destructive wars launched against Gaza in 2007/2008, 2012, 2014, (2 more wars in 2021 and 2022) and the 16-year blockade imposed on 2.4 million Palestinians causing decline in the quality and quantity of health services provided and thus leading to more disabilities (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 2020). Another example is the amputation of the lower and upper limbs of 148 Palestinians who suffered limb injuries caused by live ammunition fired by Israeli forces during the 'Great March of Return' demonstrations between 30 March 2018 and 31 July 2019. (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019). There was another increase in the number of Palestinians with disabilities who could join PHEIs. For instance, the number of students (mainly) with physical and visual disabilities enrolled in the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) increased from 99 in 2013 to 140 students in 2023 according UG Centre for Disability and Inclusion Services (2022).

In brief, assessing Palestinian higher education policies and practices can bdisabilitiesan ethical commitment to exploring and supporting the rights and needs of students with disability to quality accessible inclusive education. It also can be seen as an embodiment of a fundamental principle of resistance to discrimination, oppression and injustices and promotion of universal values of equity, quality, and social justice. Therefore, this research aimed to review the current inclusive higher education policies and assess the inclusiveness of the existing practices that included admission and enrollment, teaching, curriculum and learning materials assessment, learning environment and resources and website concerning students with disabilities in PHEIs. To achieve this aim, this study attempts to answer these questions:

1. What factual information is available about Palestinian SWD enrolled in PHEIs?
2. To what extent do current Palestinian policies promote the right of students with disability to access IHE?
3. To what extent do PHEIs have practices that implement the right of students with disability to access IHE?
4. What policies and practices do the participants suggest to make PHEIs mor accessible to SWDs?

Method

Apart from the answers of the first question (eliciting factual and statistical information), the study embraced a qualitative approach and open questions to gather data based on experiences of participants, and analysis of policy documents relating to policies and practices in PHEIs.

Four data collection tools were used to collect data from February to July 2022. To overcome the political isolation and mobility barriers imposed on the OPTs, the email correspondence or 'data generation by correspondence' (Kralik, 2002; Parris, 2008) was employed (first) to collect factual quantitative data about the students with disabilities enrolled in the academic year of 2021/2022. A tabulated data collection form was prepared and emailed to 11 university policy makers / directors of disability centres, units or offices (henceforth offices). Email correspondence proved to be a valuable tool not only in gathering factual data but also was used to request obtaining the policy documents (strategic plan, strategic goals) of the 11 participant universities (only six documents were obtained). It was also used to nominate a senior administrator or director of the disability office for individual interviews.

Secondly, two focus group discussions involved 38 participant students with disability who were enrolled at 11 PHEIs during the academic years of 2021/2022. Reflecting the reality of disabilities type, most of these gender balanced students had visual and mobility (physical) impairments and few had hearing impairment. They participated in two focus group interviews (workshops): one held face-to-face in Gaza and another was held online with students in the West Bank. In each workshop, the participants were distributed into three sub-groups according to their disability type: visual, physical and hearing.

Third, six directors of disability offices and senior administrators (4 males and 2 females), including one participant with disability were involved in individual interviews: two face-to-face in Gaza and four online interviews with these participants in the West Bank and Jerusalem. These conversational and open-question

interviews were loosely semi-structured in order to elicit as much information as possible related to the objectives of this study.

In the interviews and the focus group discussions several domains were developed. The list was developed in light extensive survey of related literature investigating inclusive policies and practices and based on the experiences of the researchers, especially the third who is blind. Each of these domains had several guiding points (standards / criteria) covering as many specific inclusive policies and practices as possible. This list was emailed to all 42 participants a week before the date of the meetings and workshops, so they could prepare and find up to date relevant and rich evidence-based data. The two workshops and six interviews were video recorded except one interview in which notes were taken upon the request of one university respondent. All the recorded interviews and workshops were transcribed and thematically analysed according to the related questions.

The fourth tool involved thorough content analysis of 11 policy documents (5 government policy documents and 6 university's strategic plans and goals) in terms of availability of clear and detailed inclusive policies that support the right of PWDs to IHE. All these documents were included in Appendix (1).

All necessary ethical research considerations (including getting informed and voluntary oral and written consent) were taken into account to ensure safety, accessibility, safeguarding, confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and privacy of all respondents before, during and after the discussions and interviews took place.

Results

A variety of results were obtained and presented under four domains, directly related to the four questions of this study: factual information, policies, practices and suggestions by the participants.

Factual Information

The factual information obtained about Palestinian students with disability included their total number (percentage), gender, disability type, and the universities they enrolled at as shown in Table (1). There were only 732 students with disabilities enrolled in 11 major universities in the academic year of 2021/2022. They represent only 0.45% of 161,300 Palestinian students enrolled at these 11 participant universities that have more than 70% of the total number of all students (226,000) enrolled at all 48 PHEIs in the academic year of 2021/2022 (PCBS, 2022). These 732 students had three disability types: visually impaired (43%), physically impaired (35%) and hearing impaired (22%). Two universities (An-Najah National University and the Islamic University of Gaza) have almost half (49%) of these students with disability. The number of female students with disabilities is 44.5% which is 11% less than the number of male students.

Table 1

Factual information about SWD enrolled in 11 PHEIs

#	PHEIs	Male students			Female students			Total	100%	Enrolled students
		Visua l	hearin g	physica l	visua l	Hearin g	physica l			
1	Palestine Technical College	2	3	6	-	1	-	12		2,100
2	Al-Azhar University-Gaza	3	-	4	3	-	5	15		15,500
3	Israa University	0	46	7	-	-	--	53		7,000
4	Al-Aqsa University	3	6	7	7	10	11	44		22,200
5	University of Gaza	2	1	6	3	-	7	19		2200

6	University College of Applied Sciences Al-Quds Open	10	-	1	11	-	6	28	6,000
7	University (West Bank & Gaza)	17	12	29	23	10	31	122	37,000
8	Islamic University Gaza	59	11	10	52	10	11	153	17,900
9	An-Najah National University	46	21	54	38	18	29	206	24,000
10	Birzeit University	12	2	11	9	1	9	44	15,000
11	Al-Quds University (Jerusalem)	7	4	4	8	7	6	36	12,400
Total		161	106	139	154	57	115	732	
Visually impaired		161				154		315 (43%)	
Hearing impaired		106				57		163 (22%)	
Physically impaired		139				115		254 -35%	
Grand total		406				326		732	
Percentage		55.50%				44.50%		100% 161,300	

Policies

Reviewing 11 policy documents developed by the Palestinian government, Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MOEHE) and major universities has revealed these findings.

Government policies

Reviewing five constitutional laws and ministerial policies related to disability showed the availability of several general policies, plans, and strategic goals that promote the general provision of inclusive education for PWD. However, these policies stated almost nothing about IHE compared to what was emphatically and clearly stated about all pre-university education (pre-school education, basic education, secondary education). The thorough analysis of these policies also revealed no laws, articles or policies referring to the right of disabled students to IHE, including the documents prepared by the MOEHE, Education Law and Palestine Inclusive Education Policy and The 2017–22 Education Sector Strategic Plan. The Palestine Disability Law No 4 was prepared more than two decades ago without being updated in constantly changing context and technologies.

PHEIs Policies

Only six university policy documents (strategic plans, goals) were obtained through email correspondence and surveying the web pages. Analysing them exhibited lack of any strategic plan or goals that promote access and inclusiveness of PHEIs pertaining admission and enrolment, pedagogy, curricula, assessment, resources, website, languages and communication and physical environment.

Practices

Based on the focus group discussions and interviews, the results revealed that the inclusiveness of the existing practices differ widely among PHEIs: some institutions used numerous inclusive practices that facilitated learning while others had to face numerous challenges to provide access to IHE. The findings were grouped these domains.

Disability offices

Only very few (three) PHEIs developed disability and special education offices to provide substantial inclusive academic and non-academic activities and services. These centres were committed to providing equal learning opportunities for special needs students and also were dedicated to providing them with inclusive learning materials and related information. These few centres' activities included adapting learning and assessment materials, adapting curricula (in Braille, amplifier or audio recording), organising awareness workshops and lectures on the right of PWD to IHE, delivering specialised training on using languages (Braille and sign language), computer literacy and educational and assistive technologies. Finally, some of these offices organised extracurricular, recreational, social, sports, religious and national activities for students with disabilities.

Nevertheless, many students reported that most universities did not have disability service offices and some of the available offices were usually understaffed and depended on volunteer assistant students without disability to cooperate and assist their colleague students with disability. But most of these volunteers could not offer quality services to PWDs, especially during the examination period. To overcome this problem, one director reported that his university added voluntary extra credit hours in some departments to credit these assistants. This means their voluntary commitment was credited as part of their academic study. Furthermore, some students added that most universities do not have well-qualified administrators or technicians who could offer professional support to these students.

Admission and education fees

While most PHEIs mainly accepted physically and visually impaired students and a few students with hearing impairment, almost all PHEIs did not accept deaf students in any bachelor programmes. Only one university admitted few deaf students in a one-year post-secondary diploma in information technologies. Concerning financial assistance given to SWD, the available partial grants varied widely from one university to another. For instance, only one university director confirmed that his university provided SWD with 100% tuition fees exemption while all other universities exempted these students from 30 - 75% of tuition fees as long as their GPA did not fall below a certain level.

Academics and pedagogical practices

Both student and director participants confirmed the general constructive, cooperative and supportive practices of almost all professors in all courses taught. They added that almost all academics allowed visually and blind students to audio-record their lectures while very few academics refused to allow so 'for their own personal reasons' as said by few participants. Furthermore, almost all academics cooperated well with special education offices in facilitating the adaptation of learning materials, using educational platforms (e. g. Moodle) for assignments and exams. Generally, participants described academics as approachable, friendly and can be contacted easily.

However, some participants reported that there were insufficient systematic awareness activities and training on inclusive pedagogical and administrative practices in most PHEIs. They added that there was a lack of multi-lingual inclusive communication in two senses: unfamiliarity of almost all academics with Braille and sign languages and effectively communicating with SWDs with more understanding and consideration due to poor use of appropriate language with respectful terminology related to disability.

Assessment

Concerning assessment in a context dominated by exam-oriented education, professors were flexible, considerate and cooperative with both students and disability offices where they later employed different techniques to adapt exams, quizzes and assignments for visually impaired students. For instance, some written assessment activities were enlarged, printed in Braille or the answers were given orally. Another positive experience was increasing the exam time by 15 to 20 minutes. On the other hand, the participants reported that most academics, especially those who were teaching and assessing students with disability for the first time in their classes, lacked awareness and experience on inclusive teaching and assessment, especially when they use slides, coloured pictures, maps, diagrams or tables. Among the several real stories (experiences) narrated by some participants is how some professors willingly visited some students' houses to teach or examine when these students were not able to come to the university due to having severe or full mobility disability.

Learning environment

It mainly included infrastructure, resources, libraries, labs, printing facilities and devices. Few PHEIs had sufficient, appropriate and up to date computer labs, Braille printers, screen readers and voiceover readers and other assistive devices for students with impairment. Concerning cooperation and sharing the limited available resources and assistive technologies among neighboring PHEIs, some directors and students gave positive answers where some students from different local universities were able to use Braille printing facilities for free. However, many students complained about the lack of providing/lending/donating students laptops or I-Pads and keeping them in their custody until the end of their studies.

Regarding the inclusiveness of libraries, almost all PHEIs lacked special education space or corners that have Braille, voice books, audio-visual materials with subtitles. The libraries also lacked special study rooms equipped with assistive learning technologies. The infrastructure and facilities had several physical barriers as most participants reported. These barriers were related to lack of easy access to labs, toilets, furniture, printing facilities, and assistive technologies such as magnifiers, talking devices, Braille machines and typewriters, screen reading software, text-to-speech systems using optical character recognition, large print materials, and phones with large tactile buttons, books in audio or video and signed format.

One clear problem is the lack of ramps, Braille labels and audible signals in elevators, and limited accessible washrooms. While few PHEIs had signs on the stairs for students with visual impairment to recognize the number of steps and the end of the stairs. Additionally, almost all chairs, tables, corridors, doors, white boards, cafeteria, prayer hall and study halls were not adapted to suit physically and visually impaired students.

Most participants confirmed the inaccessibility and non-inclusiveness of PHEIs' websites. For example, there were no voice over icons or signs in the websites that help disabled students to access the websites. Another problem reported and common to most PHEIs is lack of detailed and clear content (information or guideline) related to informing students with disabilities on their rights and responsibilities. However, very few universities had some of this information available on the webpages of the disability service centres.

Participants' Suggestions

At the end of the focus group workshops, the participants were asked this hypothetical question; 'If you were a legislator, senior policy maker, decision maker (e. minister of education, president of a university) or professor, what two or three policies, decisions or practices would you develop to make HE more accessible and inclusive Palestinian students with disability?'

Here is a brief outline of the main suggestions given by all participant (students and directors):

1. Establishing a ministerial body (unit or department at the MOEHE)) to develop inclusive policies, practices and services for disabled students and also to monitor and assess the implementation and progress of these policies and practices. One main function of this body would be to keep sustainable communication and coordination between the PHEIs and MOEHE concerning enhancing access to higher education.
2. Organising academic activities regularly such as study days, workshops and conferences that involve PHEIs, MOEHE, concerned NGOs and local community to address difficulties facing learners with disabilities in accessing higher education.
3. Holding periodic workshops for academics and administrators on the developmental characteristics and capabilities of students with disabilities to increase awareness, to change attitude and perception, to enhance more appropriate and meaningful communication, and to create more mutual understanding.
4. Organising specific activities to increase the awareness of families of students with disability through enhancing university-family and community collaboration. These activities aim to motivate and persuade families to encourage and motivated their sons and daughters to be prepared to join PHEIs and to contribute in creating inclusive campuses and community.
5. Developing PHEIs' website for students with disabilities in two ways: to make websites accessible to all students with different disabilities and to include more detailed information about admission and registration, grants and financial issues, all academic and assessment practices as well as services offered to SWDs.

6. Adapting resources and infrastructure available at universities and making them accessible to all students. These resources include libraries, computer labs, lifts, location of units and centres providing academic services to students with disabilities.
7. Developing close coordination and cooperation between universities and schools through the school and tertiary education providers including the current two ministries Ministry of Education (responsible for schools) and Ministry of Higher Education (responsible for HEIs), the UNRWA and private schools.

Discussion

The results and suggestions presented above were discussed from two IHE perspectives: 1) policies and practices that include teaching strategies, professors' pedagogies, assessment, learning environment, learning facilities, and website, 2) ethical perspective of equality, equity and social justice in light of recent relating local and international studies.

Inclusive information

The complete absence of any reliable and up-to-date factual and statistical information about SWDs enrolled at PHEIs indicates negligence, deprioritisation, discrimination and injustice to an already marginalised and stigmatised part of the local community. This became apparent in the inconsistency of the percentage of females with disability enrolled at PHEIs. To be more specific, Palestinian female students without disability represented 61.5% of approximately 226,000 students enrolled at all 48 PHEIs (PCBS, 2022) while the percentage of female students with disability enrolled at the PHEIs investigated reached only 44.5% of approximately 161,300 students enrolled at 11 biggest universities that have more than 70% of the total number of all Palestinian students. The negligence of such information at the national level is described as 'shamefully scant' and as 'a vast disability data hole' which is a substantial problem that hinders realising the right of PWD to HE (Walker et al., 2016). Furthermore, absence of factual information is a barrier to promoting a fundamental principle of social justice and universal values of equity for all students, including those with special education needs (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021).

Government and PHEIs Policies

Even though there were general ambitious legislations and policies formulated by the Palestinian government and the MOEHE for adopting inclusive education, there were two main problems with these policies. One problem is the focus of the government and MOEHE laws and policies on the inclusiveness of school education but neglecting and deprioritizing access to IHE. Problem is likely to limit PWD's active learning opportunities in PHEIs (Bualar, 2018) and would also prevent them from becoming able to enrol at PHEIs. When these students miss the opportunity to join quality inclusive higher education on an equal basis with their peers, they would feel deprived of their right to access higher education and thus they would lose their right to decent jobs that lead to independence, self-sufficiency, inner peace, and welfare.

Another problem is the general formulation of these government policies which prevented answering an ongoing question about the extent the existing policies 'can be practically translated into reality through concrete procedures, teacher training programmes, building and adapting infrastructure, etc. to serve all Palestinians with disability' (Al-Masri, 2021, p. 12). Lack of inclusive detailing of these policies, especially the 'outdated' Disability Law of 1999 requires immediate modification and elaboration (Giacaman et al., 2021) (P31) to enable the government, MOEHE and PHEIs from working 'in unison towards the goal of PWD integration' (Abdul-Samad, 2020). A related flaw is the lack of detailed mechanisms to monitor the progress of implementing these policies made the number of disabled Palestinians enrolled at PHEIs very small, not representative, not gender balanced, more marginalised and leaving an unknown number of these students behind.

Concerning the policies of PHEIs, most of them did not have clearly stated policies or plans that convey practical commitment to promoting and implementing IHE key components which led to uneven practices that were mainly dependent on individual initiatives and inconsistent foreign support (J. Walker et al., 2016). Another serious problem is the inconsistency between the absence of clearly stated policies and existence

of several inclusive practices implemented. This inconsistency would automatically lead to unplanned, unguided and ineffective improvement of the practices, infrastructure and resources allocated to students with disability. This means that these policies did not prioritise and thus invest in eliminating discrimination and serious barriers to ensure equal access to higher education among all learners (Ngui, 2019).

Practices

PHEIs varied widely in their practices to provide accessible IHE. For example, some universities have already developed disability care offices (centres) while many others have not. Generally, these few existing offices seem to have played a constructive role in facilitating learning and enhancing SWD's academic performance through providing students with assistive technology, especially visually impaired students whose academic achievement was as equal to their colleagues with disability according to some Palestinian studies (Shehada, 2018). However, these existing ones need to be supported by more assistive technology and well-trained and sufficient staff. They also need to share and transfer their experiences and achievements to other local universities and encourage other universities to benefit from their experiences.

Another example of such wide variety in using inclusive practices is the grants (education fees reduction) provided to students with disability which were not enough to support these students' right to IHE. This support becomes imperative when one knows that most of disabled students usually come from needy families in a context of ongoing conflict. This major financial barrier requires clear government and MOEHE legalisations, policies and practices to ensure that no disabled students were excluded from accessing IHE for financial reasons. In fact, educating, empowering and employing PWDs is a long-term investment as once their professional life is built, they would become not only self-dependent but also productive citizens and contribute in the well-being and welfare of themselves and their community.

The general supportive, cooperative and flexible pedagogical practices done by Palestinian professors and administrators demonstrated that the Palestinian culture tends to be 'protective of individuals with disabilities' as many of them were harmed by the ongoing (Ramahi et al., 2021; Snounu et al., 2019). Illustrating this point, Snounu (2019) concluded that Palestinian professors consider their support to disabled students as part of their national duty and patriotic responsibility towards their occupied homeland suffering injustices and discrimination 'despite the absence of any specific mandates or codes from the university' (Snounu, 2019, p. 70). Nevertheless, few concerns were reported about limited negative experiences with few professors who lacked relevant pedagogical knowledge, skills, and strategies to communicate and cope with the students' special needs as practiced in studies conducted in other contexts (Zhang et al., 2018).

Assessment practices also needed to be 'rethought from the viewpoint of inclusion' (Nieminen, 2022, p. 1). This means that universities and colleges need to commit themselves to upgrading university teachers' competencies and strategies not only in teaching and communication but also in inclusive assessment to make them active sources of inclusion not sources of discrimination and stigmatisation and thus contributing in promoting interdependence and social justice for students with disabilities (Gibson, 2015; Morina et al., 2015).

A further remaining problem is the deprivation of deaf students from having access to PHEIs. Compared to students with visual and physical disabilities, deaf students still cannot join any bachelor academic programmes that accommodate their capabilities due to lack of the necessary facilities, equipment and expertise in deaf education and above all absence of any policy and planning to initiate accessible academic programmes to them. Even the limited and stumbling deaf education programmes opened recently in one or two universities or colleges still face several difficulties. For instance, the deaf students are taught just one-year diploma in information technology, and they cannot join any other courses. This means that both physically and visually impaired students face moderate academic and non-academic problems compared to deaf students who aspire to be professionals in the fields that meet their interests and capabilities. Not giving them the right to IHE would make them feel they are discriminated against and not able to contribute to their community (Walker et al., 2016).

The learning environment described in PHEIs is consistent with the findings of some previous studies. It was shown that there was a long list of actions to be taken to create accessible and inclusive campuses in terms of buildings, classrooms, library resources, labs, assistive technologies, paths, lifts, stairs, learning materials, curricula, and printing facilities. It is true that there were still physical barriers present in many universities including the PHEIs (Bualar, 2018; Ramahi et al., 2021), but with varied levels of difficulties. These

environmental and spatial barriers impede the realisation of quality practices that guarantee effective IHE and increase the risk of forcing students with disabilities to drop out early from the universities than the students without disabilities (Salha & Al-Badawi, 2021). To avoid the presence of these barriers:

Oliver (1990) proposed that university environments should be constructed in such a way that they are accessible to all people, regardless of whether or not they have a disability. In this regard, Powell (2013) and Watchorn et al. (2013) suggested that the planning of university spaces should be based on the principles of universal design, thus recognizing the diversity and heterogeneity of students and their needs (Sánchez-Díaz & Morgado, 2021, p. 184).

University websites are vital for communicating content and detailed information before, during and after students join universities. Similar results to the findings of this study concerning the inaccessibility and non-inclusiveness of the PHEIs were cited in an evaluative study done by Doush et al. (2020). Evaluating partially the accessibility of all 18 Palestinian universities homepages Doush et al. (2020) found these webpages did not conform to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Lack of accessible information on inclusively designed websites necessitates creating university websites (e-learning environment) that follow content accessibility guidelines and ensure that the web pages are designed inclusively (Karhu, 2014). This means that adding related information and implementing standard features such content screen readers, screen magnifiers that enlarge content, colour change icon, voice recognition software used to input text in another form of assistive technology, understandable instructions and feedback for website forms and applications for good usability and information such as text, images, and sounds.

In brief, both academic and non-academic practices used in an inclusive environment including organising extracurricular, recreational and social activities provide both academic and psychosocial support to students with special needs. Such practices reinforce their confidence in themselves, in the university community and in society. They also make them become more independent and more self-sufficient and thus more productive to build and lead better life for themselves, their families and the local community.

Experience-based suggestions

All the seven suggestions made above were based on first hand experiences expressed by the participant students and practitioners (directors of disability offices). Their suggestions stressed the need to speed up the actions to improve, update, detail and implement inclusive policies and practices to meet the educational needs of students with different types of disabilities. Doing so means supporting their right to be equally educated in an accessible and inclusive environment and would also mean meeting their desire to be independent and self-sufficient and equally productive in their community in line with their potentials, skills, competencies and capabilities as was stressed in several studies reviewed (Black et al., 2015; Lyman et al., 2016; Marshak et al., 2010; Perry & Franklin, 2006 cited in Toutain, 2019)

Recommendations

In light of all the findings, discussions and suggestions made above, several key recommendations emerged that would ensure achieving equity, equality, social justice, and sustainable self-dependency, self-sufficiency and above all contribution and productivity of PWD instead of the contrary perception and attitudes. First, the government concerned institutions, MOEHE and PHEIs existing policies should be revised, updated and detailed to stress the adoption and implementation of IHE with clear reference to students with different disabilities. Also, several context-based, operational mechanisms should be developed to promote and monitor the implementation and progress of these modified policies. To do so inclusively, higher education disability experts and disability representatives should be involved to align all policies with practices to deliver quality IHE for all, as an embodiment of the motto ‘Nothing about us without us’.

Second, the practices to be performed in line with these updated policies should involve systematic, comprehensive and effective concrete actions that ensure the implementation of all core elements of quality IHE. These actions include increasing awareness, promoting multilingual and multi-modal communication, enhancing teaching, learning and assessment, adapting curricula and infrastructure, and providing resources and assistive technologies. To achieve this inclusiveness, detailed administrative and pedagogical guidelines should be prepared and made accessible to all universities, senior administrators, academics and students with and without disabilities.

Third, an extremely needed database should be created about all students with different disabilities at all education stages from pre-school to postsecondary education and across academic, technical and vocational tracks. This database should be created by involving all concerned bodies in the OPTs, including MOEHE, PCBS, PHEIs and UNRWA, taking into consideration the ongoing disability increase in the OPTs. Containing detailed factual information and statistics will be extremely vital for current and future strategic planning and for providing quality inclusive education for all Palestinians.

Fourth, as the PHEIs face a barrage of continuing and increasing challenges, especially finance and resources, it is highly recommended for all higher education stakeholder institutions, (namely, MOEHE, PHEIs, UNRWA, local and international NGOs) to plan to establish a national inclusive library for educating all Palestinian people with different disabilities. This e-library should make use of up-to-date technologies and information and communication technologies that can overcome isolation imposed on the OPTs. Developing such a cost-effective library would be a long term investment in the current and future generations of disabled Palestinians and would enable them to access inclusive formal and informal education for all.

Conclusion

This research study aimed to generate a greater understanding of four key issues pertaining to the right of Palestinians with disabilities to access quality IHE in the OPTs. It addressed the importance of creating institutional factual information as a powerful instrument to developing quality IHE. Additionally, it examined the current policies and showed the necessity to collaboratively and inclusively adapt, update and detail them to translate the right of students with disabilities to access PHEIs. Moreover, it highlighted the main inclusive and non-inclusive pedagogical practices, resources and infrastructure in an inclusive higher education setting.

Furthermore, it illustrated the need to conduct more detailed research on the challenges facing PHEIs and the specific difficulties that students with different disability face in different universities and colleges, including also students with different learning difficulties and emotional/ mental disorders resulting from the protracted crises, pressure and pain the Palestinians have been suffering for decades. Finally, this study advocated the right to higher education as a means to empower and then employ graduates with disability to invest in their capabilities, skills and expertise so that they can contribute in the welfare and growth of their community and humanity.

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Appendix

List of policy documents analysed

A. Governmental and Ministerial policy documents

1. Disability Law approved by the Palestinian Parliament in 1999,
2. Education Law decreed in 2017
3. Palestine Inclusive Education Policy prepared in 2017
4. Palestine's Constitution of 2003
5. The 2017–22 education sector strategic plan, Palestine by the Ministry of Education.

B. PHEIs Policies

1. Al-Aqsa University's *Strategic Plan 2019 -2023*
2. Birzeit University's *Strategy 2017-2022: Entrepreneurial Role & Being*
3. Israa University's *Strategic Goals*
4. Palestine Technical College's *Strategic Plan 2017 – 2020*
5. Al-Azhar University *Strategic Goals of the Deanship of Quality*
6. The Islamic University of Gaza *Strategic Plan 2020-2024*