



## Disabled Students at the Palestinian Universities: Birzeit University as a Model

### Estudiantes discapacitados en las Universidades palestinas: La Universidad de Birzeit como modelo

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#### ABSTRACT

Universities vary in the logistic support they provide for disabled students. At the same time, universities can be a model for the broader society in how they undertake this responsibility and involve this group of people. In this study, we explore how students with disabilities perceive their university life at Birzeit University. This will reflect their relationship to their wider society. We also tried to identify the various challenges faced by disabled students during their university life. Participants' narratives were used to collect data in focused groups. Data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed following the qualitative approach of content analysis. Results indicated that disabled students at Birzeit University are trying to live as independent students. They believe that their daily experiences are very similar to other students' experiences at the university. This perception helps them to construct a positive sense of self, which, in turn, encourages them to overcome the social burdens upon them. In conclusion, the interviewees believed that their disabilities are not what identifies them as students. Regarding their relationship to society, the disabled students struggle to change the stereotype that society stigmatizes them as incapable and helpless. The results also indicated that disabled students are distinguished by having the 'desire', which is their main motivation to achieve their dreams and challenge their existing stereotyping. They do not give up; they have a strong will and determination to achieve their goals. The study recommends increasing financial and learning support for disabled students and raising awareness of their potential among Birzeit University students.

#### RESUMEN

##### Palabras clave:

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Las universidades varían en el apoyo logístico que proporcionan a los estudiantes discapacitados. Al mismo tiempo, las universidades pueden ser un modelo para la sociedad en general en la forma en que emprenden e involucran a esta categoría. En este estudio, tratamos de explorar cómo perciben los estudiantes discapacitados su vida universitaria en la Universidad de Birzeit, que se reflejará en su relación más amplia con su sociedad. También tratamos de identificar los diversos desafíos a los que se enfrentan los estudiantes discapacitados durante su vida universitaria. Se utilizaron las propias narraciones de los participantes para recopilar datos en grupos focalizados. Los datos de las entrevistas se transcribieron y analizaron siguiendo el enfoque cualitativo del análisis de contenido. Los resultados indicaron que los estudiantes discapacitados de la Universidad de Birzeit intentan vivir como estudiantes independientes. Creen que sus experiencias diarias son muy similares a las de otros estudiantes de la universidad. Esta percepción les ayuda a construir un sentido positivo de sí mismos, que a su vez les anima a superar las cargas sociales que pesan sobre ellos. En conclusión, los entrevistados creen que sus discapacidades no son lo que los identifica como estudiantes. En cuanto a su relación con la sociedad, los estudiantes discapacitados luchan por cambiar el estereotipo con el que la sociedad los estigmatiza como incapaces e indefensos. Los resultados indicaron también que los estudiantes discapacitados se

distinguen por tener el “deseo”, que es su principal motivo para lograr sus sueños y desafiar los estereotipos existentes sobre ellos. No se dan por vencidos; tienen una fuerte voluntad y determinación para lograr sus objetivos. El estudio recomendó aumentar el apoyo financiero y de aprendizaje para los estudiantes discapacitados y concienciar a los estudiantes de la Universidad de Birzeit sobre su potencial.

## 1. Introduction

College years are a period when people grow at the psychological and social levels. The university atmosphere shapes the individual identity and contributes to growth. College life is organized through societies and organizations that connect students to their society and allow students to live in a democratic climate. This environment encourages personal opinions and freedom of choice, so preparing students for real life in society. Moreover, university life is an opportunity for people to make new friendships and social links. Various social, artistic, physical, and cultural activities provide students with opportunities to practice their interests and hobbies and increase their self-esteem and encourage them to shoulder their responsibilities (Alhabit, 2015).

However, students, in general, encounter several challenges during their college life. Some, for example, may live an independent life far away from their families. As a result, they start making new social relationships while working seriously hard to achieve the optimal academic level and to overcome the challenges and difficulties which arise in their life. These conditions help their character to grow and shape their identity (Aljarah and Alotoum, 2017).

For students with disabilities, these challenges could be complex. However, according to the Palestinian disability law, people with disabilities must be provided with equal opportunities for enrollment in schools and universities and all necessary pedagogic means and facilities (Arafat, 1999). Accordingly, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education endeavors to establish an appropriate environment for the needs of persons with disabilities in schools, colleges, and universities. This could be done through modifications and accommodations, including elevators, technological equipment, accessible restrooms, and fields and sports rooms appropriate for the mobility of people with disabilities (Qure'a, 2004).

Most universities in the West Bank and Gaza have started accelerating efforts to support students with disabilities to overcome cultural attitudes that accept current conditions and to ensure inclusion for these students (Snounu, Smith, and Bishop, 2019). However, according to The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), “around 93,000 individuals in the Palestinian territory suffered from at least one disability” (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), 2019), but there are no accurate statistics about the number of disabled students enrolled in Palestinian universities.

Palestinian Universities offer support for students with disabilities. For example, An-Najah National University, which has the most significant number of students in different programs, offers full support for students with disabilities to continue their higher education. Furthermore, the University facilitates their admission to its academic programs, offering them the opportunity to benefit from its loans, scholarships, and financial facilities. Additionally, the University provides counseling services for disabled students and those who work closely with them. Moreover, the University has established a computer lab for visually impaired people serving 12 students. The lab provides curriculum courses in Braille books. It also conducts several training programs for visually impaired non-students from the community without any charge (www.najah.edu).

Like Al Najah National University, Birzeit University, the context of this study, based on its official protocols, has never refused admission to students based on physical disability. According to the statistics for the academic year 2017-2018, the University has 33 students with visual, hearing, and physical impairments (about 0.25% of the total number of students in the University), whom the University supports in various ways, such as providing Braille books or wheelchairs for the target groups. The University also has established the Institute of Speech and Speech Therapy, allowing students with disabilities to participate in sports activities and scientific competitions. It has also established a laboratory for people with disabilities, equipped with computers, printers, and electronic devices suitable for them. In addition, Birzeit provides volunteer students to help the students in need find their way around, write their lectures or tests through coordination with the cooperative work program at the Deanship of Student Affairs(www.birzeit.edu).

Recently, Birzeit University has formed a special committee to follow up on students with disabilities. The University Academic Council announced the committee in the year 2016/2017. The committee staff includes architecture, social science, psychology, college of pharmacy and medical professions, Curriculum and Instruction department, students' affairs, and registration office. In addition, the committee directly connects with the office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs and with the resource's reinforcement office at the University. The committee continuously provides suggestions and proposals to enhance the learning conditions of disabled students. For example, the committee has recently submitted a proposal regarding preparing a library resources

room with speaking machines to read for the target students. Here are some examples of the issues the committee is working on improving (an interview with the committee's coordinator at Birzeit University, 2019):

- Examine the infrastructure of the university and the degree to which it fits people with disabilities. Specialists from the department of architecture are studying the possibilities of improving the university's buildings to accommodate all types of disabilities.
- Examine the attitudes of the decision-makers at the university using the necessary research methods. After collecting and analyzing the data, development workshops and awareness seminars will be arranged in this regard.
- To attract and encourage disabled high school students to join Birzeit, the university decided to give them five bonus marks to raise their chances of being accepted upon admission. This decision is announced in the university's catalog, and students can use the offer by attaching their medical reports.
- Recently, there have been serious efforts to integrate the disabled into the university's strategic plan.
- Hold dialogues with the General Association for Disabled Palestinians and the NGOs (Center for Development Studies) to institutionalize the work.
- Works to integrate students with disabilities with the university community through various activities such as playing, singing, enhancing their talents, and showing them off.

The present study begins with a statement of the problem and theoretical framework analysis and previous studies focused on disabled students. It then describes the methodology of the current study, its results, and then a discussion and conclusion.

### *1.1. Statement of the Problem*

Although Birzeit University believes in equal opportunities for all students in its regular learning program, it is necessary to examine students with disabilities. The university needs to identify and analyze the challenges they face to provide reasonable assistance to these students and adapt to their university environment. This study tries to answer these questions:

1. How do students with disabilities view their academic, social, personal and spatial life at Birzeit University? How do they look at their relationship with others and with the community around them?
2. How do students with disabilities face the challenges they meet at Birzeit University?

### *1.2. Theoretical Framework Analysis*

This paper suggests analytical frameworks to examine how systems of beliefs, social, educational, financial, and service-oriented factors may impact the implementation of accommodations and lead to the exclusion of disabled students in higher education institutions.

As we know, disability often negatively affects the lives of people born with it. This is reflected in their attitudes and behaviors towards themselves and others (whether relatives or fellow students) they meet and deal with. Furthermore, disability influences their attitude towards the environment, with all its components (Alssayid, 2010). Their negative attitude involves many problems that need to be studied, analyzed, reduced, and treated if necessary. These steps are vital to enable students with disabilities to adapt to their university environment and prepare them academically, vocationally, and professionally. In addition, such interventions will help them become active and positive citizens at one with their surroundings (Alhadidi, 2003).

The following are the most dominant factors disabled students face during university education at the global and local levels:

#### Social factors

These factors refer to making typical connections between students with disabilities and all those who will contact them, such as university employees, stakeholders, peers, and fellow students, including non-disabled students, faculty members, administrators, and others. The feeling of unease in relations with the surroundings creates psychological, emotional, behavioral, and social problems, which reflect in the student's poor adaptation

to the environment (Oliver, 2013). The social challenges also include making friends, which is an urgent need for the disabled person, whether in the early stages of life or later years, in addition to problems related to leisure time and fun activities (Alwehidi, 2012).

#### Educational factors

Some of these factors are related to educational institutions in general, including universities. Others relate to educational programs for people with disabilities or the attitudes of peers and fellow students, faculty members, or administrators at all levels inside the University (Alhabit, 2015).

#### Financial factors

Disability brings financial burdens upon the students themselves, their families, and the society where they live. Having a family member with a disability may have multiple effects that threaten the family's stability and their ability to continue the journey of life and endure the costs and burdens of living. The financial challenges are more evident in low-income families, especially when the disabled person cannot work or contribute to the family's income or learning costs (Suhail and Awad, 2005).

#### Service oriented factors

Students with disabilities face several problems with services provided either at the campus or outside. These problems include transportation, lifts, stairs, equipment, tools to be used by students with disabilities, and university laws and regulations. In addition, the students' needs vary according to the nature and degree of the disability they face. Students with a hearing impairment, for example, may require a sign language interpreter; visually impaired students need visual aids, Braille materials, and special computers to empower their learning; and finally, physically disabled students need specific preparations in buildings, such as the availability of lifts.

## 2. Studies focused on disabled students

Disability Studies is a required field to achieve social justice and inclusion. Integration of mental disability and physical disability should be embraced as integral parts of cultural diversity, and negative perceptions and unjust practices against people with disabilities should be fought (Siebers, 2008).

Price (2011) discusses the discourse and rhetoric of mental disabilities in academia. She points out the importance of looking at disability, mental disability, from a rhetorical perspective; people perceive those with mental disabilities as rhetorically disabled, thus mad, or crazy, and categorize them as deviant from regular. She insists that academic discourses in college settings are created and produced by able-minded ideology, which ignores any understanding of students and professors with mental disabilities and creates practices of exclusion and discrimination.

Siebers (2008) highlights the importance of the ideology of ability; he focuses primarily on how little awareness people show about its patterns, contradictions, and influence. This is essential because some theories refer to 'biological inferiority, creating a systematic view of disabled people as an inferior sub-class (Siebers, 2008, p.13). This is incompatible with the view of disabled people as equals who merely need assistance in specific ways.

Arabic studies still confirm that disabled students are affected by many problems and factors during their university life. Alhabit (2015) examined the problems faced by students with disabilities in universities in a study to identify the problems of integrating students with visual impairment in the university from their point of view. The sample of the study consisted of 19 female students with visual disabilities at Al Qaseem University. The study used a questionnaire to identify the problems faced by these visually impaired students. Results showed that, among the various problems these students face, achievement problems were the most important. These were followed by financial problems, psychological problems, social problems, and administrative problems, in that order.

Khodja (2006) aimed to identify the types of environmental difficulties that obstruct students with visual impairments in higher education institutions. It proposed providing visually impaired students with as much information as possible about their surroundings to improve their self-confidence and to reduce their fear

while moving around. The study also aimed at enhancing these students' interactive skills within their social environment. The study was conducted at King Abdulaziz University and consisted of 40 female students aged 19-25, whom all had visual impairments. A questionnaire was used to identify the types of difficulties these students faced. The results revealed that environmental and spatial challenges were most common, such as the distance between college buildings, crowded paths, insufficient time allowance between lectures, colliding with different objects obstructing the roads, and the lack of movement skills, and the lack of vehicles to move from one place to another inside the campus. Other difficulties were not recognizing directions; academic difficulties, such as the difficulty of keeping focus during lectures due to their length; difficulty reading textbooks; the official procedures they go through during their study period; the length of the curriculum; lecturers' low voices in large classrooms. In addition, these students suffer while using voice-to-text software or a Braille writer with its disturbing noise. They also complain about the unavailability of printers and computers. Furthermore, they suffer the process of transcribing tapes and time constraints, and the lack of sufficient educational aids.

The study of Ibrahim (2011) is aimed to identify students with visual impairments in Jordanian universities. The sample consisted of 68 students from different universities in Jordan. The results showed that students with visual impairment in Jordanian universities face moderate problems. The study results revealed a significant difference in reading and doing tests attributed to the variable degree of disability. For example, blind students face higher reading and writing tests than those who have relative visual impairments. No statistically significant differences were found that attribute to gender, specialization, or educational level variables.

However, attitudes towards people with disabilities are different in higher education in Palestine. For example, according to Birzeit University (2015), Isra, one of the identified 33 students with disabilities attending the university, reported that her peers made her feel at home despite her fear and hesitation. She now aspires to be an influential person in the community. Said, a student with a physical disability at Birzeit University, who achieved a score of 99% on his matriculation exam in high school, was only able to enroll at the university a year after he finished high school because he lived in Hebron and needed to cross checkpoints every day. Birzeit University provided him with a wheelchair, and he now lives with relatives next to Birzeit University. Said confirmed that his success at the university resulted from the cooperation of university administrators and professors (Birzeit University, 2015). As for university professors in Palestine, it seems from the few studies done there those professors in Palestine are sympathetic towards disabled students and cooperate with and extend help to disabled students.

The Palestinian Women Research and Documentation Centre-UNESCO and Birzeit University (2011) found inadequate data regarding students with disabilities in college settings. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the conditions of students with disabilities and the challenges they face to analyze these problems and provide reasonable assistance to these students to adapt to their university environment.

### 3. Methodology

The current study followed the qualitative approach; this approach embraces the view that, as far as people's perceptions are concerned, there is no single truth; all are contextually and culturally related. It, therefore, seeks to find the answer to questions about the meaning and individual interpretation of life. It is used to answer open questions relating to people's attitudes and beliefs in each contextual setting. (Hartly and Muhit, 2003)

In this study, the participants were some of the 33 disabled students of the 2017-2018 academic years at Birzeit University (about 0.25% of the total number of students in the university); five of them were interviewed in a focus group. The interviewees were three males and two girls; four were visually impaired, while one had a physical disability. They were aged 18 to 23 years, and their academic specialisms were: Psychology, German language, English language and literature, Arabic language. All participants have had disabilities since birth. In addition, the director of the office of the disabled at the university and the coordinator of the special committee for the disabled were also interviewed for one hour each.

The following is a description of each participant using nicknames:

Huda:	A 20-year English language student with visual impairment decided on Birzeit University because of the type of services the university offers to the disabled. Her passion for the English language encouraged her to study it at university.
Mahmoud:	An 18-year-old from Gaza was born with visual impairment, a first-year psychology student from Gaza with visual disability. Mahmoud chose to join Birzeit because it is an internationally recognized university. Since he was 13, he studied at the School for the Blind in AlBireh city.



Ghadir:	A first-year English literature student, a member of a family of six people, and visually impaired. Ghadir thinks Birzeit was a successful choice for her because she believes, on the one hand, studying here increases her chance of better job opportunities. On the other, she mentions Birzeit has a special office for the disabled, which provides people of disability with required services, sets, or aids of several types.
Salah:	A 23-year-old German language student in his fifth year at the university. He reported that he had studied two years at the department of geography at first, then had to change his study field due to a lack of a system that enables blind people to study geographical maps.
Haya:	She studies the Arabic language in her third year. She joined Birzeit because she has loved the university since childhood and because the university offers scholarships to students with disabilities. She has physical difficulty, which makes it difficult for her to walk.

#### 4. Results of the study

This study aimed to examine the perceptions and beliefs of students with disabilities about their experiences of university life and took Birzeit University as a model. In this section, results related to the two main questions of the study are presented.

##### 4.1. Results related to the first question:

How do students with disabilities conceive their daily academic, social, personal, and spatial life at Birzeit University? How do they analyze their relationship with others and with the community around them?

After conducting in-depth interviews with students of disabilities at Birzeit University and following the content analysis methodology for the focused group interviews, the study answered the first question with two actual contents: The first is related to self-perception as a disabled student, while the other is about how others at Birzeit university perceive them through their daily interactions as students.

##### Theme one: self- perception as a disabled student

People with disabilities interpret their daily life at the university as like other students' lives. They perceive their routines and interactions with others around them, such as teachers, employees, and students, as the same course of life as other people, though sometimes with a difference in feeling. This perception helps them build a positive perception about themselves. The positive self-image pushes these people to continue their lives and face the challenges and burdens society places. However, the disability here does not represent the complete and comprehensive identification of the people with disabilities. These students do not look at themselves through their disabilities, and they refuse to be identified through their abilities. This is what the subjects referred to during the interviews.

A visually impaired German language student, Salah confirmed: "I hope all my fellow students and friends here treat me like a normal person. I want them to try to change their view of me in general. They may treat me like this because they help me move between places. Yet, if you come to my house, my surroundings, you will notice that people in my social circle treat me very normally. They don't even remember I am blind". However, he also said, "To be blind doesn't mean to keep doing nothing. On the contrary, I can do everything, I don't feel different, and no one in my circles makes me feel so. I want this perception about me to reach all students, professors, everyone. We want everybody to feel we are the same as them. We can do what they can do; we can even do some tasks cannot do. You may feel I'm exaggerating, but I am talking at least about myself".

Throughout these words, Salah communicates a message to his fellow students that he hopes to be treated like other people. He wants people to see him, not his disability. He wants people to judge him by what he can do, not what he lacks. Salah also challenges the look of pity in people's eyes: "We are similar to them; we can also work- as people of disability, not only me as Salah." The united identity of the disabled appears clearly through using the plural pronoun "we." At the same time, Salah refers to sighted people as an opposing party, using the pronoun "them," which also indicates a way of protecting himself through seeking a united identity with the group of visually disabled.

Ghadeer, the English literature student, says she is treated like all other students when she needs to meet her professors at the university. If she has any questions, she goes to the lecturer's office during office hours and waits like other students; "like other students, I go in the office hours, ask the lecturer, and he answers. I don't

underestimate my abilities by asking him to come to me. On the contrary, sometimes I wait for the professors among many others in a crowded office, but if the professor is kind, he asks me to proceed and says: 'You... Come in.' They don't want to make me wait long."

Mahmoud, a first-year psychology student, describes the interaction between himself and other students within the learning groups as positive. He thinks he is free to express himself and share his views freely in the discussion groups, ignoring his disability as an impeding factor. This positive self-perception reflects a different image from the society's typical passive stereotypes about the social interaction of disabled people: "It is always nice participation. I always engage in groups: I express my opinions freely, and often I am the spokesperson in the group. The group members often tend to adopt my opinions because, when I speak, I give persuasive arguments and evidence which confirm my point of view".

Mahmoud holds a very positive perception of himself. He also considers himself equal to others; he understands his disability and that he is able, because of this understanding, to overcome the obstacles he faces in society. What is also important is his understanding that every human being has some aspects of weakness or deficiency. This philosophy helps Mahmoud face and overcome obstacles in his life journey. "I am satisfied with myself; I consider myself a very normal human being who is different from anyone else. It is easier to cope with your problem when it is clear like mine. It is clear that my problem is lack of ability to see; however, most people have not diagnosed problems and not plain. Every person has a deficiency of some kind; there is no perfect human being".

He also speaks about his achievements in life as the achievements of any person in his society. "My achievements are like the achievements of any other student who works to succeed, and I feel proud and happy for what I achieve."

Huda, a visually impaired student who studies the English language, describes her achievements in life (such as joining the university) as an average achievement like what all others succeed in doing. She adds that, like others, success motivates her to continue working hard and makes her more satisfied with herself: "I feel that everything I do is normal. What I achieve is a requirement to continue life. I mean, I don't consider I've done super things when I succeed. I do things and work hard for myself. When I succeed, I feel more satisfied with myself."

Concerning her awareness of her rights and duties, says Huda, who suffers a physical disability: "Sure, I consider myself like everyone else. I have rights and must do my duties." This awareness of her rights and duties helps Huda to claim her rights. She believes that she has not lost these rights because of the existence of the disability but enjoys these rights like other members of society.

Huda also talks about her teachers' treatment of her as equal to others and mentions the positive impact of this equality on building her self-esteem. Receiving the same treatment makes her feel she is equal to her fellow students: "They give me the sense that they understand my case, they refuse to treat me as if I am different from other students. This boosts my self-esteem and encourages me to participate more confidently".

Salah expresses his satisfaction with the way "some" educators treat him like other students. He says: "Professors vary in their treatment. Some don't discriminate; they treat me like other students, and I love this. With others, I feel pity in their voice". Some educators treat disabled students as helpless.

He also expresses his independence, his self-reliance in lectures, and does all the tasks by himself, using his laptop (provided by the university). "Look! I have done all my work on my laptop! The single thing I need others' help in is writing down the answers in tests. It is a trifle! It is very normal. When someone's arm is broken, they bring someone to write for him". The positive identity is evident throughout his words, and he shows complete ability and readiness to commit to duties and complete his tasks during his college life without help from anyone. Even when he needs assistance from others to write an exam, he does not feel that as a moment of weakness because of vision loss. On the contrary, he feels very typical about it; it does not make him feel disabled or weak. He compares the case to someone with a broken arm who wants help to write. As a result, this perception helps him achieve success in his life, and his educational journey boosts a strong will and a positive identity.

Haya, a student with physical impairment, says about using the lifts: "Normal, like others. If I am going to the top floors, I use it. If the floor is low, I don't."

Salah demands that society treat people of disability with what they deserve, based on their abilities and potential. He requires society to deal with a person of disability as a person, not as a handicap. "We must be treated based on our competence and our ability, not on the basis that we need pity and sympathy; we are not people you need to feel sorry about. No, treat us normally, like any other person, not in a special way and not with sympathy. Ultimately, we are normal people. That is what I want you and everybody to understand. I would very much like to change the way society looks at us."

## Theme two: Relationship with the other and society

The idea of this theme is resisting society's stereotype about people with disabilities, which implies they are incapable and helpless. The disabled subjects of this study want to demonstrate to their community that they can provide help and help and be active in their study or field of work.

Mahmoud explains that one of the goals he has set for life is to help others: "I work to help people, as well as myself."

He clarifies that he offers help in areas where he knows. "I mean, I am trying to help anyone who asks me about things I have mastered. I mean, I don't like to boast that I know and offer my help with things I don't even understand. I offer help within the limits of my knowledge." Mentioning a situation when he helped a disabled fellow student to use the speaker on his mobile device, he says: "This young man got a mobile phone a year ago or less. I tried to help him use the device and the speaker; I tried to teach him because I'd been using a similar one before. Not only this, I mean I can help my peers in the same field of study; I help in things where I know. I do my best to have an active role in my society".

Salah spoke about his relationship with the staff in the college. "My relationship with them is limited to helping other students. I don't ask for help for myself. I talk to them about my fellow students' issues, not mine".

Considering the difficulties and obstacles that the community throws in the way of disabled people, Huda suggests how to face these challenges, maintaining self-confidence and keeping to lives' goals. "Before I joined the University of Birzeit, nobody encouraged me to apply for this university. They said it is a demanding college with lots of hard work, but I wanted to be here since it is close to my home and, I mean, we have to challenge life's difficulties. If people tell you something, it is unnecessary to believe everything; if it is hard, let it be hard. This university means a lot to me, and I have to make an effort, work hard and get a job".

Here, the negative image the society holds towards visual disabilities is manifested. Society warned her she would fail and would not make it, discouraged her, and warned her about the challenge of college study. The sighted society only offered her frustration to eliminate one of her fundamental rights: to study at Birzeit. However, Huda did not let these discouraging comments stop her from continuing her university study or abandoning her dream. She has a vision and understanding of the elements that lead to success in university study. She understands that she can make it through dedication, continuous efforts, and hard work. This, in turn, is also a challenge to achieve success. Despite talking about herself, she speaks using plural pronouns; "We need to work hard, we have to face challenges." in a strong indication of her shared identity with visually impaired people.

The subjects here present a different picture from the stereotype that society holds of people with disabilities who always need help and cannot offer it to others in return.

### 4.2. Results related to the second question

How do students with disabilities face the difficulties they may suffer at Birzeit University?

Achievement for people with disabilities is represented in having the determination and the 'will' which motivates them to follow their aims and achieve success. After all, the achievement is summarized in exceeding the difficulties and obstacles the society places on them.

This is what the interviewees stated throughout the interviews. Mahmoud expressed his techniques in overcoming life's challenges: "I love to encourage myself, no matter how hard the challenges I face: I don't even think about giving up, for example. I pursue my aim until I achieve it: I want to trace the goals I draw in my mind, and I expect to have a certain difficulty at some stage in life". The speaker is clarifying his relationship with himself and with society. He is the kind of person who refuses to surrender to pressures. He has a strong will to make him trace his goal despite all the difficulties and challenges.

He also believes that the university is the entry into the future and considers facing obstacles and difficulties as an achievement for him as a visually impaired student; "Definitely, I have a long way to walk, I am still in my first year, I haven't achieved much, but I didn't have any academic or administrative problems at the university." He explains, "As for the visually disabled, registration for courses is facilitated by a group of friends of the disabled at the university."

He describes his determination to achieve his goals as an 'unnatural' one. He says: "I have an unusual desire to reach any goal that I wish in life. The most serious problem I encountered in the Faculty of Arts was that I was supposed to graduate in 4 years, not five. We cannot join any college we wish, because the possibilities and facilities of the university are minimal, even here at the College of Arts. I first registered in the department of history, but I did not like the specialization. I changed my field of study to geography, but the university refused



and forced me to change because they say geography study requires visual skills. This was not fair in my opinion, because accepting any student in the department implicates that they must provide him with what he needs to continue, such as Braille maps”.

He continues explaining the record of the challenges imposed on him by the educational system: “These problems aren’t limited to the university; it was since I was at school when I wasn’t allowed to join the scientific stream, because math is an essential subject, and it is not available in Braille form. Why? These obstacles prevented me from my scientific rights; I mean, when I don’t join the scientific stream, I’m not allowed to study engineering, for example. However, in other parts of the world, you can find mathematicians and scientists who are blind. Ahmad goes on to say, “If I were allowed to join the scientific stream, things would have been different now. Even when we join the literary stream, the Ministry of Education cancels maths from our tests. However, I’m sure there is mathematics using Braille somewhere.

It is apparent here that disability prevented Mahmoud from joining the scientific stream and deprived him of the right to study the specialty he wants at the university because of the lack of the necessary facilities and equipment.

Regarding their participation in extracurricular activities, such as seminars, competitions, contests, and elections:

Ghadir said: “I don’t participate. These activities waste my time. I don’t even vote in the student council’s elections”.

Huda adds: “I love to participate in the college activities, but I only come two days a week. If the university has more clubs that fit us ... but I haven’t heard about something like that”.

Salah also mentions, “The majority of students here are passive; unfortunately, they don’t have enough awareness and morals. However, there is still a group which offers help.”

People with disabilities do not participate in the minimal number of extracurricular activities, either because they are not informed about them or because of the limited days scheduled for them.

Salah continues: “For example, in the lectures, I sometimes ask for summaries of the material, but students refuse to give me.... why don’t they cooperate?”

Ghadir resumes: “It would be great if the university provided us with more Braille books (references) to help in help in preparing research, not only the course books.”

Salah: Dr. Mohamad (nickname) (visually impaired professor and head of the English department) helps us with Braille devices and hearing aids.

Explaining how he moves out, to and from the university and between the university buildings, Mahmoud says: “When I arrive and leave Ramallah city, I always find someone who offers help. When I get out of the car, I find someone who offers to pick me up (thank God, I can walk!) It is great to depend on yourself, but it is also nice to find people around you who are offering help.”

Salah confirms: “People with physical disabilities may face difficulties when moving around, but visual disabilities always find help.”

Ghadir: “I wish there were an awareness campaign for ordinary students to raise awareness about dealing with us and tell them there is nothing to fear if they help us.”

Students with physical disabilities face more significant challenges than those visually impaired, and they need more support under this heading.

Answering the question concerning their residence and the distance between their accommodation and the university, they reported:

Salah: in Birzeit with my family.

Mahmoud: My family lives in Gaza. I stay in a hotel here.

Ghadir: With my family.

Huda: With my family.

Haya: with my family.

All the participants stay in their family homes, except Mahmoud, who stays in a hotel at AlBireh city and uses the university taxis to get to his college. Therefore, the achievement for people of disability is challenging their difficulties and overcoming them.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

There is plenty of research on the political realities in Palestine, but not directly connected with disability. Moreover, studies of students with disabilities in Palestinian higher education are scarce. This study tries to

investigate the perceptions and beliefs of students with disabilities about their university lives through conducting in-depth interviews with them.

Regarding their self-perception, the results showed that disabled students do not want to be treated differently. Therefore, they demand to be treated in a usual way on various levels: within the university environment, when they need teachers during office hours, and participate and work in groups in the class. They also want to be evaluated based on similar criteria regarding what they achieve or succeed in, how their teachers interact with them and assess their assignments. This showed that the participants overcome the social and academic barriers the society put on them. This confirms that Birzeit University, like other universities in Palestine, has made many efforts to support students with disabilities to overcome cultural attitudes that accept current conditions and to ensure inclusion for these students (Snounu, Smith, and Bishop, 2019). However, this result is different from what Alssayid (2010) found in his study, that disabled people hate their disability, because it negatively affects their lives.

Results about how others at Birzeit University perceive disabled students from their perspective through their daily interactions as students showed that the negative image the society holds towards visual disabilities is manifested. Society warned them that they would fail and would not make it, discouraged them, and warned them about the challenge of college study.

Thus, there is a mismatch between how disabled students perceive themselves and how others in the University and the society perceive them and their abilities. This suggests the need to offer disabled students services to accommodate them in the University and make others within the University more aware of disabled students and disabilities in general.

The results also showed that disability sometimes prevents disabled students from joining the programmes they wanted at the University because of the lack of the necessary facilities and equipment. Furthermore, students with a physical disability face more significant challenges than the visually impaired and need greater support under this heading. However, all of them asserted that they have the determination to achieve their goals. Also, the professors in Birzeit showed cooperation and sympathy towards them. This agreed with the findings of Snounu, Smith, and Bishop (2019), who showed that, in general, Palestinian culture tends to be protective of individuals with disabilities.

To conclude, people with disabilities believe that their everyday life is the same as other people. This perception helps them to be positive towards themselves and helps them to survive and overcome the challenges they may face.

The study does not reveal any administrative or economic difficulties for these students. Birzeit University awards them full scholarships. The Office of the Disabled facilitates their life with the necessary devices and aids available and helps them register for their courses. There may, however, still be problems with the resources needed for specific programmes, as indicated by one student's inability to follow a Geography course because of the lack of maps readable by the visually impaired.

## 6. Recommendations for Further Research

The study recommends increasing financial and learning support, such as Braille books (references) for disabled students and raising awareness of their potential among the Birzeit University community. Birzeit University has plans to accommodate disabled students better, and this should be shared within the society of the university.

To get a more representative view of the disabled Palestinian students at Palestinian universities, the study recommends further studies to investigate the attitudes and beliefs of disabled students at all universities. It would also be interesting to compare these attitudes and beliefs between disabled students in more than one university and the disabled Palestinian community.

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