

Faculty Perspectives on Accommodations for Students with Visual Impairments in Saudi Arabia

Journal of Visual
Impairment & Blindness
2021, Vol. 115(3) 242-250
© American Foundation
for the Blind 2021

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0145482X211018886
journals.sagepub.com/home/jvb



Mohaned G. Abed¹ and Todd K. Shackelford²

Keywords

inclusive education, Saudi faculty members, students with disabilities, visual impairment

Students with visual impairments (i.e., blindness and low vision) encounter unique social and structural challenges in higher education (Hutchinson et al., 1998). Students with visual impairments are less likely to graduate than are students who are not visually impaired (Herbert et al., 2014; Richardson & Roy, 2002). This disparity may be attributable, in part, to academic failures associated with challenges posed by lack of appropriate instructional and institutional support and to student withdrawal from university because of insufficient educational guidance (Wagner et al., 2007).

In addition to insufficient instructional, institutional, and educational support, physical mobility around the university often presents challenges for students with visual impairments (Roy, 2000). Cole-Hamilton and Vale (2000) documented that students with visual impairments encounter impediments in accessing textbooks in an appropriate format (e.g., Braille, audio). Borland and James (1999) reported that students with special educational needs (including visual impairments) sometimes miss lectures or fail to meet assignment deadlines due to the unique challenges they face. As a consequence, both the

student and the instructor may perceive absences and academic failures as an inevitable correlate of the student's special needs (Borland & James, 1999). Koutsoklenis et al. (2009) recommend that instructors be afforded professional development to better inform them about students with visual impairments and to facilitate successful instruction of these and other students with disabilities.

Faculty attitudes toward students with disabilities and inclusive education

University faculty attitudes toward students with disabilities and toward inclusive higher education have received recent research attention. This research indicates that faculty participation and support is crucial for

¹ King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

² Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA

Corresponding author:

Todd K. Shackelford, PhD, Oakland University,
112 Pryale Hall, Rochester, MI 48209, USA.
Email: shackelf@oakland.edu

developing appropriate accommodations to facilitate successful inclusive educational practices (e.g., Sánchez et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2010). *Accommodations* refer to adjustments to instruction and assessment to ensure that students with disabilities can access course content and can demonstrate knowledge of course material (Crawford, 2013; Sánchez et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2010). In a rare investigation of non-Western faculty attitudes toward students with disabilities, Dupoux et al. (2006) used a self-report survey to assess faculty attitudes toward students with disabilities in Haiti. The results of this research corroborate other research indicating that faculty participation and support is important for developing appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities.

Inclusive higher education in Saudi Arabia

Previous research investigating faculty attitudes towards inclusive education of students with visual impairments has been conducted primarily in Western countries. No research has explored these issues in Middle Eastern countries. As in the West, Saudi Arabia has mandated inclusive higher education practices that provide equal opportunities for students with disabilities, including visual impairments (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2015). A specific “disability code” was enacted by the Saudi government in 2000 to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to free medical, educational, psychological, rehabilitation, and social services provided by public institutions (Ministry of Education, 2002, 2015).

Such policy directives require that persons with disabilities have equal rights as well as free access to meaningful education as defined in the *Teacher’s Guide for Learning Disabilities* (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Although it has been many years since the enactment of these policy directives, they have not yet been fully implemented, especially in the context of university students with disabilities. As a consequence, there remains a lack of special needs education services for students with disabilities, including students with visual impairments (Alquraini, 2011). Barriers to implementation of special services include faculty misunderstanding or a lack of support for accommodations for students with disabilities (Moriña et al., 2015). It is also plausible that many faculty members have not had students with disabilities in their classrooms, and they, for this reason, have not had to be informed about the provision of appropriate services and accommodations (Tincani, 2004).

Purpose

We investigated Saudi university faculty perspectives on and perceptions (or misperceptions) of accommodations for students with visual impairments. We administered a modified version of the Accommodation of University Students with Disabilities Inventory (Wolman et al., 2004) to faculty members at five Saudi universities. We investigated faculty assumptions about the challenges of instructing students with visual impairments and faculty satisfaction with professional development offered to facilitate successful instruction for students with visual impairments. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first such investigation of Saudi university faculty.

Method

PARTICIPANTS

This study was approved by the Ethics Review Committee of King Abdulaziz University. We secured informed consent from all participants. The population of

Table 1. Demographic information for study participants.

Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	16 (20.5)
Female	62 (79.5)
Age (years)	
20–30	58 (74.4)
31–40	11 (14.0)
41–50	7 (9.0)
51–60	2 (2.6)
Nationality	
Saudi	75 (96.2)
Non-Saudi	3 (3.8)
Academic rank	
Assistant professor	65 (83.3)
Associate professor	8 (10.3)
Professor	5 (6.4)
Experience instructing students with special educational needs	
Yes	14 (17.9)
No	64 (82.1)
Relatives with special educational needs	
Yes	5 (6.4)
No	73 (93.6)
Academic field	
Natural sciences	28 (35.9)
Social sciences	50 (64.1)
University	
Umm Al-Qura	10 (12.8)
King Abdulaziz	44 (56.4)
Taif	8 (10.3)
King Saud	6 (7.7)
Jeddah	10 (12.8)

Note. $n = 78$.

interest was faculty members with doctoral degrees who worked at public universities in Saudi Arabia. Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic information we received from participants. About three quarters (79.5%) of participants were female. A majority of participants were Saudi nationals (96.2%), young (74.4% were aged 20–30 years), early in their career (83.3%

were assistant professors), had not previously taught students with special educational needs (82.1%), and did not have relatives with special educational needs (93.6%). A majority (64.1%) of participants affiliated with the social sciences rather than the natural sciences. Finally, a majority (56.4%) of participants worked at one university, and between 7.7% and 12.8% were employed by one of the other four universities.

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

Following previous research investigating university faculty perspectives on accommodations for students with visual impairments (e.g., Dupoux et al., 2006), we administered a self-report survey to university faculty. We sent electronic invitations to participate in an online study about inclusive educational practices to chairs of departments at five public universities in Saudi Arabia. Chairs then forwarded invitations to departmental faculty. Seventy-eight faculty members completed the survey. We administered a version of the Accommodation of University Students with Disabilities Inventory (AUSDI; Wolman et al., 2004), modified to focus on visual impairment. Specifically, we modified the AUSDI first by replacing “disability” with “visual impairment.” Second, we omitted two items that were not appropriate for people with visual impairments. We did not add items to AUSDI. The modified AUSDI includes 18 items organized into three categories: perspectives on accommodations for students with visual impairments (items 1–8), assumptions about students with visual impairments (9–12), and professional development to instruct students with visual impairments (13–18). Response categories for the items are: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*. Table 2 presents the 18 items by category.

Table 2. Item-level, category-level, and full-scale descriptive statistics for the Accommodation of University Students with Disabilities Inventory.

Category: Perspectives on accommodations for students with visual impairments		
Item	Mean	Standard deviation
I would provide additional time to complete exams for students with visual impairment	4.24	0.94
I would allow students with visual impairments to take oral exams instead of written exams	4.04	1.01
I would allow students with visual impairments to take proctored exams in a supervised location	3.49	1.38
I would extend deadline for completion of projects or papers for students with visual impairments	3.09	1.33
I would provide copies of lecture notes with Braille language for students with visual impairments	4.12	0.97
I would allow students with visual impairments to tape record lecture	4.17	0.83
I would allow students with visual impairments to give oral presentations instead of written projects	4.10	0.80
I would allow students with visual impairments to have notetakers	4.04	1.04
Items across category	3.91	0.65
Category: Assumptions about students with visual impairments		
Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Having a few students with visual impairments in my class may jeopardize the quality of instruction	1.63	0.74
Having a note-taker in my class could be distracting for the other students and/or myself	2.10	1.06
Students with visual impairments are not able to develop critical thinking skills as well as other students	1.26	0.47
Many people with visual impairment expect special treatment	3.27	1.09
Items across category	2.06	0.49
Category: Professional development to instruct students with visual impairments		
Item	Mean	Standard deviation
In the last 5 years, my institution has provided training to faculty or administrators about students with visual impairment	2.87	1.02
In the last 5 years, my institution has provided me with written information about accommodating students with visual impairment	2.82	0.99
My institution has a written policy that addresses the needs of students with visual impairments	3.08	0.91
My institution has an office specifically designed to meet the needs of students with visual impairments	3.35	1.03
My institution has an e-mail bulletin board that provides information about services for students with visual impairment	2.79	1.04

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Category: Professional development to instruct students with visual impairments		
Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Disability service staff has assisted me at least once in providing accommodations for students with visual impairments	2.80	1.05
Items across category	2.95	0.81

Note. $n = 78$. Response categories for items are: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*.

The AUSDI was translated into Arabic and then pilot-tested on five faculty members at two Saudi universities to eliminate problems of clarity and fluidity.

Results

Following Wolman et al. (2004), we constructed scales for the three categories assessed by the items included in the AUSDI. These scales (and a full-scale, across all items) each achieved acceptable Cronbach's alpha reliability ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). Table 2 presents item-level, category-level, and full-scale descriptive statistics.

For items in the category "Perspectives on accommodations for students with visual impairments," the across-category mean (3.91) indicates that Saudi university faculty participants were positively disposed to accommodating students with visual impairments. The results also indicated that participants were more positively disposed to some accommodations than others. For example, participants were more positively disposed to allowing students with visual impairments to record a lecture, whereas participants were less positively disposed to allowing these students to take proctored exams in a supervised location. Participants most strongly agreed with providing additional time to complete exams and least strongly agreed with extending deadlines for completion of projects or papers.

For items in the category "Assumptions about students with visual impairments," the across-category mean (2.06) indicates that Saudi university faculty participants disagreed with the negative assumptions presented by the items. The results also indicated that participants disagreed more strongly with some of the assumptions than with others. For example, participants more strongly disagreed with the assumption that having a few students with visual impairments in a class might jeopardize the quality of instruction, whereas participants disagreed less strongly with the assumption that having a notetaker in class could be distracting for students or the instructor or both. Participants most strongly disagreed with the assumption that students with visual impairments are not able to develop critical thinking skills as well as do other students, and they least strongly disagreed with the assumption that many students with visual impairments expect special treatment.

Finally, for items in the category, "Professional development to instruct students with visual impairments," the across-category mean (2.95) indicates that Saudi university faculty participants were ambivalent about the extent to which their institution provided professional development to instruct students with visual impairments. The results also indicated that participants reported some variance in their assessment of the individual items. For example,

participants agreed less often with the statement, “My institution has provided me with written information about accommodating students with visual impairments,” whereas they agreed more with the statement, “My institution has a written policy that addresses the needs of students with visual impairments.” Participants agreed least often with the statement that their institution has an email bulletin board that provides information about services for students with visual impairments. Participants agreed most often with the statement that their institution has an office specifically designed to meet the needs of students with visual impairments.

Discussion

This study contributes to the literature by beginning to address accommodations for university students with visual impairments in Saudi Arabia. To the best of our knowledge, the current research is the first such study to investigate Saudi faculty perspectives on accommodations for students with visual impairments. These findings can be used to facilitate and guide the development and provision of support services and professional development programs at Saudi universities. For example, the results indicate that Saudi faculty members are positively disposed to accommodating students with visual impairments. That is, Saudi faculty members accept the idea of providing reasonable accommodations and seem willing to support such accommodations. However, the willingness of faculty members to provide accommodations for students with visual impairments does not mean they will maximize their efforts to do so, since some of the current results also indicate that faculty may hold some mildly negative assumptions about students with visual impairments (e.g., participant responses indicated that they neither agree nor disagree with the assumption that “many

people with visual impairments expect special treatment”). Indeed, according to the results of this study (specifically, responses to the item, “Professional development to instruct students with visual impairments”—see Results), faculty members may benefit from professional development that includes clear presentation of guidelines that regulate their teaching relationships with students with visual impairments. The results of the current research indicate the Saudi university faculty—like their Western counterparts (e.g., Hitch et al., 2015)—are not often trained to deploy instructional techniques designed to maximize learning for students with disabilities. Previous research documents found that training faculty to respond effectively to meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities improves student outcomes (e.g., Lovet et al., 2015; Murray et al., 2011). Implementing such training programs in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, therefore, may enhance the educational experience for students with disabilities, including students with visual impairments.

The results of the current study indicate that Saudi university faculty have positive perspectives about instructional accommodations for students with visual impairments. This finding is consistent with the results of studies conducted in Western countries investigating faculty attitudes about accommodations for students with disabilities (e.g., Lombardi et al., 2015; Murray et al., 2008; Wolman et al., 2004). That is, Saudi faculty members, like their Western counterparts, do recognize the moral import and educational value of providing instructional accommodations for students with disabilities. Saudi faculty members typically complete graduate education in Western countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and United States). Thus, they likely were exposed to the Western institutional commitment to providing equal educational

opportunities for students with disabilities, but these results may also reflect the Saudi government's recent mandates to provide equal educational opportunities to students with disabilities (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2002, 2015).

In the current research, Saudi faculty reported some disagreement with the statement, "Disability service staff [members have] assisted me at least once in providing accommodations for students with visual impairments." This finding suggests either that Saudi faculty have sought support from disability service staff members for students with visual impairments, but may not have received it, or that Saudi faculty have not sought support for students with visual impairments, perhaps because they have not had these students in their classrooms. Consistent with the latter possibility, the population prevalence estimates of low vision and blindness in Saudi Arabia are around 9% and 1%, respectively (Al Faran et al., 1993; Al-Shaalm et al., 2011; Tabbara & Ross-Degnan, 1986).

Hong (2015) argues that interest in providing inclusive education has been strongest for elementary and middle-school education in the United States, with apparently less interest or concern for inclusive higher education, which may also be the case for Saudi Arabia, in particular. Furthermore, many university faculties may not have encountered the challenges of instructing students with special educational needs (Tincani, 2004). University faculty, therefore, may lack understanding of these special needs and may not have had an opportunity to develop inclusive instructional strategies.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current research explored university faculty perspectives about provision of accommodations for students with visual

impairments at Saudi universities. We relied on a relatively small sample of faculty participants housed at five Saudi universities. We encourage replication of this research with a larger sample of faculty participants, and with faculty housed at other Saudi universities. In addition, future research could assess the perspectives of faculty housed in different types of higher education institutions, such as private universities and technical colleges.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The current research was designed to explore faculty perspectives on accommodations for students with visual impairments, but we encourage parallel assessments of university clerical staff members and administration. Staff members and administrators may have unique opportunities to facilitate appropriate instructional accommodation for students with visual impairments and other disabilities. The current research suggests that it may be useful to create a professional development program for Saudi university faculty to improve their knowledge of students with visual impairments and about accommodations for students with visual impairments. This professional development program might be designed, in part, to encourage faculty to actively welcome students with visual impairments in their classrooms, to actively support their academic success alongside students without visual impairment, but also to provide students with visual impairments with reasonable accommodations, as now mandated by Saudi law.

Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Deanship of Scientific Research for financial support.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research (DSR), King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, under Grant No. G: 302-324-1440.

References

- Al-Faran, M. F., Al-Rajhi, A. A., Al-Omar, O. M., Al-Ghamdi, S. A., & Jabak, M. (1993). Prevalence and causes of visual impairment and blindness in the south western region of Saudi Arabia. *International Ophthalmology, 17*, 161–165.
- Alquraini, T. (2011). Special education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges, perspectives, future possibilities. *International Journal of Special Education, 26*, 146–156.
- Al-Shaalin, F. F., Bakrman, M. A., Ibrahim, A. M., & Aljoudi, A. S. (2011). Prevalence and causes of visual impairment among Saudi adults attending primary health care centers in northern Saudi Arabia. *Annals of Saudi Medicine, 31*, 473–480.
- Borland, J., & James, S. (1999). The learning experience of students with disabilities in higher education. A case study of a UK university. *Disability & Society, 14*, 85–102.
- Cole-Hamilton, I., & Vale, D. (2000). *Shaping the future the experiences of blind and partially sighted children and young people in the UK: Summary report*. Royal National Institute for the Blind.
- Crawford, L. (2013). *Accommodations vs. modifications: What's the difference?* <http://www.nclld.org/at-school/generaltopics/accommodations/accommodations-vs-modification>
- Dupoux, E., Hammond, H., Ingalls, L., & Wolman, C. (2006). Teachers attitudes toward students with disabilities in Haiti. *International Journal of Special Education, 21*, 1–13.
- Herbert, J. Y., Hong, B. S. S., Byun, S., Welsh, W., Kurz, C. A., & Atkinson, H. A. (2014). Persistence and graduation of college students seeking disability support services. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 80*, 22–32.
- Hitch, D., Macfarlane, S., & Nihill, C. (2015). Inclusive pedagogy in Australian universities: A review of current policies and professional development activities. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 6*, 135–145.
- Hong, B. S. S. (2015). Qualitative analysis of the barriers college students with disabilities experiences in higher education. *Journal of College Student Development, 56*, 209–226.
- Hutchinson, J. S. O., Atkinson, K., & Orpwood, J. (1998). *Breaking down barriers: Access to further and higher education for visually impaired students*. Stanley Thornes.
- Koutsoklenis, A., Papadopoulou, K., Papakonstantinou, D., & Koustriava, E. (2009). *Students with visual impairments in higher education institutes*. Universidade da Macedônia.
- Lombardi, A., Vukovic, B., & Sala-Bars, I. (2015). International comparisons of inclusive instruction among college faculty in Spain, Canada, and the United States. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 28*, 447–460.
- Lovet, T. S., Kresier, N., Camargo, E., Grubbs, M., Kin, E. J., Burge, P. L., & Culver, S. M. (2015). STEM faculty experiences with students with disabilities at a land grant institution. *Journal of Education and Training Studies, 3*, 27–38.
- Ministry of Education (2002). *Organizational rules for special education institutes and programs*. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh.
- Ministry of Education. (2015). *Teacher's guide for learning disabilities*. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh.
- Moriña, A., López, R., & Molina, V. (2015). Students with disabilities in higher education: A biographical-narrative approach to the role of lecturers. *Higher Education Research and Development, 34*, 147–159.
- Murray, C., Lombardi, A., & Wren, C. T. (2011). The effects of disability-focused training on the attitudes and perceptions of university staff. *Remedial and Special Education, 32*, 290–300.

- Murray, C., Wren, C. T., & Keys, C. (2008). University faculty perceptions of students with learning disabilities: Correlates and group differences. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 31*, 95–114.
- Richardson, J. T. E., & Roy, A. W. N. (2002). The representation and attainment of students with a visual impairment in higher education. *British Journal of Visual Impairment, 20*, 37–48.
- Roy, A. W. (2000). *Students perspective: Discussing with visually impaired students on the effects of serious sight loss in themselves, their families and friends*. Royal National Institute of the Blind, UK.
- Sánchez, M. T. P., Fernández-Jiménez, C., & Cabezas, M. F. (2018). The attitudes of different partners involved in higher education towards students with disabilities. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 65*, 442–458.
- Tabbara, K. F., & Ross-Degnan, D. (1986). Blindness in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 255*, 3378–3384.
- Tincani, M. (2004). Improving outcomes for college students with disabilities: Ten strategies for instructors. *College Teaching, 52*(4), 128–133.
- Wagner, M., Newman, L., Cameto, R., Levine, P., & Marder, C. (2007). Perceptions and expectations of youth with disabilities: A special topic report on findings from the National Longitudinal Study-2 (NLTS2). *Journal for Vocational Special Needs Education, 30*, 18–27.
- Wolman, C., McCrink, C. S., Rodriguez, S. F., & Harris-Looby, J. (2004). The Accommodation of University Students with Disabilities Inventory (AUSDI): Assessing American and Mexican faculty attitudes toward students with disabilities. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 3*, 284–295.
- Zhang, D., Landmark, L., Reber, A., Hsu, H. Y., Kwok, O.-M., & Benz, M. (2010). University faculty knowledge, beliefs, and practices in providing reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 31*, 276–286.