

## Equity in Higher Education: Towards a Further Inclusion of Learners with Disabilities

المساواة في التعليم العالي: نحو زيادة إدماج المتعلمين ذوي الإعاقة / الاحتياجات الخاصة

Mr. Abdelmadjid BOUGUERNI

University of Djillali Liabes, Sidi Bel Abbess, Algeria

madjd007@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** Increasing numbers of Algerian individuals with disabilities are pursuing higher education in order to achieve satisfying careers and sustainable earnings. However, these learners face numerous challenges which can prevent them from completing their degree program. Taking this into consideration, the present research sought to explore their perceptions of the learning environment and the obstacles that they face on the premises of the Algerian higher education institutions. This work also reports their recommendations on how to create an ideal learning context using a biographic-narrative research design. The results of this study highlight hurdles that these learners have to deal with and provide a set of suggestions to make Algerian higher education a real reference of excellence for learners with disabilities.

**Key Words:** *Learners with disabilities, higher education, learning environment, teaching methodologies, Students with Special needs.*

### الملخص:

يسعى عدد متزايد من الأشخاص ذوي الإحتياجات الخاصة إلى مواصلة مسارهم الدراسي في مؤسسات التعليم العالي و ذلك سعيا لكسب وظائف مرضية و تحقيق مكاسب مستدامة. لكن يواجه هؤلاء الطلبة العديد من التحديات التي يمكن أن تمنعهم بلوغ مبتغاهم. إنطلاقا من هذا، يسعى هذا البحث إلى إستكشاف آراء الطلبة ذوي الإحتياجات الخاصة حول البيئة التعليمية و العراقيل التي يواجهونها على مستوى مؤسسات التعليم العالي في الجزائر. و يقوم أيضا البحث بنقل إقتراحاتهم و توصياتهم حول كيفية إنشاء وسط تعليمي مثالي لهؤلاء الطلبة. نتائج هذه الدراسة تكشف العقبات التي يجب على هؤلاء الطلبة التعامل معها و كذا تقدم مجموعة من المقترحات لجعل التعليم العالي الجزائري مرجعا حقيقيا للتميز للمتعلمين ذوي الإعاقات

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

الطلبة ذوو الإحتياجات الخاصة، التعليم العالي، الوسط التعليمي، الأساليب التعليمية

## Introduction

There is an ever-growing number of students with disabilities accessing higher education in Algeria to the extent that it has become a challenge for our universities to promote an educational environment in which all these learners can take part and be treated as valuable element in society. Despite the fact that the Algerian laws and legislations guarantee equal opportunities and non-discrimination for learners with disabilities, several obstacles stumble them in their quest to complete their degrees successfully.

Indeed, it is very important to consider the barriers faced by students with disabilities in Algerian universities, which can inflate their dropout rate. Such barriers, as this paper attempts to prove, can take different forms ranging from simple ergonomic barriers, such as visibility, acoustics, and classroom furniture, to complex ones related to the teaching methodology and teachers' attitudes towards disabilities. Therefore, in this study, the researcher attempts to give priority to the voices of the learners with disability as they reveal their experience at university and highlight their suggestions for a better and a more supportive learning environment.

## 1. Literature Review

Around the world, students with disabilities access to education is an ever-growing reality (Mamas, & Swan, 2015) and Algeria is not an exception. According to the Algerian National Office of Statistics (2017), out of 1605160 persons with various types of disabilities, there are more than 34000 disabled students enrolled in the course 2017/2018 compared to 3375 in in the academic year 2014/2013. One of the reasons for this growth is the governmental efforts to promote the education of individuals with disabilities especially after the signature of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in May 12th, 2009. This convention states that persons with disabilities should be guaranteed the right to have a free and inclusive education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels as well as higher education, vocational training, adult education and life-long learning, regardless of age, without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity. It also states that they should receive the necessary support, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education.

Nevertheless, there are several challenges that face Algerian institutions in their attempt to build an educational model based on the principles of inclusive education that are

highlighted in the previously mentioned United Nations convention. The reality that learners with disabilities stumble on during their university trajectory reveals several obstacles that lead many of them to dropout or, in the best-case scenario, take longer to complete their degree programs. As this research attempts to prove, the learning environment, especially at Algerian higher education institutions, can fail to support the learning process of these individuals and often additional barriers appear which students with disabilities have to overcome.

Higher education is a vehicle for improving the quality of life of all students (Shaw, 2009), however, learners with disabilities face several hurdles at the premises of our universities. The first of these hurdles appears in the form of adapting and coping with the transition from high school to university as the lack of information about the new learning environment leaves tremendous psychological impact on them. Also, several research papers highlighted the accessibility issues and the physical barriers at university (Fuller et al., 2004). Such hindrances may include the absence of safe and appropriate passages and ramps on the entrances as well as the absence of elevators, which often prevent them from accessing important facilities such libraries and restrooms. Furthermore, the suffering of learners with special needs does not end once they are inside classroom. Very often the seats are fixed and sitting in the back of the classroom or the amphitheatres does not provide optimal learning conditions for them in terms of visibility and acoustics. Unfortunately, the design of these learning settings is often done from a standardized perspective rather than applying a design which takes into consideration learners with disabilities (Oliver, 1990).

There are more teacher-related issues that learners with disabilities have to deal with in the classrooms. They may vary to include the lack of attention towards them and interaction with them, negative attitudes towards disabilities or a lack of training and awareness in the field of disability. In such cases, some learners with disabilities choose to conceal their condition as they hope to be treated as “normal” as their classmates and avoid being labelled and judged (Vickerman & Blundell 2010; Matthews 2009; and Riddell et al., 2005). Furthermore, the teaching methods are often traditional and does not take into account the accessibility of the subject material for learners with special needs as well as the absence of an evaluation system that support and adapt to their needs. For instance, teachers may not consider that learners with disability cannot use a computer or exploit the internet to prepare a homework, which might deepen their feelings of helplessness. Finally, the limited use of

technologies can further complicate the task of understanding and contributing in the lesson. We can only imagine how a learner with impaired vision, for example, can make sense of a chart or a diagram. All in all, as Moriña, (2017) states, these students often find themselves working twice as hard to achieve half as much as their fellow classmates.

To conclude, it is high time we contemplated at the presence of learners with disabilities in higher education and gave priority to their voices. Their contribution in the development of policies and decisions that affect them more than other must be emphasised as their words describe the difficulties that they find during their university trajectory and the possible improvement that can add to their welfare at Algerian higher educational environment. In short, this study seeks to reveal how learners with disabilities perceive the learning environment at Blida 2 university and highlight the shortcomings that they have to face every day. More importantly, this work aims to include these learners by listening to their suggestion on how to improve their conditions make this educational context more supportive and considerate for their special needs

## 2. Methods

In order to achieve the objective of this study and answer the research questions, the researcher adopted a biographic-narrative research design, which is ideal for giving voice to vulnerable groups.

### 2.1. Research Questions

- 1) How do learners with disabilities perceive the learning environment at Blida 2 University?
- 2) What are the difficulties that these students experience when they are at university?
- 3) What changes do these learners suggest to make their learning experience better?

### 2.2. Participants

It's eventually acknowledged that the sample is a major tenet in any given research. Research methodologists assert that when the population under investigation is large, researchers can resort to sampling. The informants composing the sample of the present study are 36 learners with some type of disability, who are doing courses at the different departments of Lounici Ali University in Blida, Algeria. This sample of the participants aged from 17 to 28 years old. All of them were contacted during the academic year of 2017/2018.

As shown in Table 1, the participants' age ranges from 17 to 29, with an average age of 22.1 years; with a majority of female presence (69.5%), which is not uncommon in most educational institutions across the country. 29% were in their first year, 21% in the second, 25% in the third, 15% in the master 1 and 10% in their master 2 of their degree programs. Ninety-one percent of the participants had been enrolled at the university between one and five years while the other 9% had been studying for more than five years. By type of disability, 40% of the participants in this study had a physical disability, 35% had a sensorial and 25% had some type of organic problem (asthma, epilepsy... etc.).

**Table 1:** Characteristics of the participants.

|                    | Range Min.-Máx.      | Mean                |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Age                | 17-28                | 22.1                |
| Gender             | Male                 | N (%)<br>11 (30.5%) |
|                    | Female               | 25 (69.5%)          |
| Educational level  | 1 <sup>st</sup> year | 29%                 |
|                    | 2 <sup>nd</sup> year | 21%                 |
|                    | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year | 25%                 |
|                    | Master 1             | 15%                 |
|                    | Master 2             | 10%                 |
| Years in college   | 1-5 years            | 91%                 |
|                    | More than 5 years    | 9%                  |
| Type of disability | Physical             | 40%                 |
|                    | Sensorial            | 35%                 |
|                    | Organic problems     | 25%                 |

### 2.3. Data Collection

A biographic-narrative methodology was used. This methodology has been used over the past fifteen or more years in a variety of research projects. This method is ideal for giving voice to vulnerable individuals, such as students with disabilities (Plummer, 2001). In addition, this methodology is great for building an in-depth learners' university life histories as well as recognizing and valuing them subjectivity (Goodson, Antikainen, & Andrews, 2017).

For this purpose, data was collected during a one-year period, and the focus was on showing their life histories. A wide range of data collection techniques were used, including in-depth interviews, self-reports, interviews with close friends, observations and so forth. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. These interviews lasted from few

minutes to few hours sometimes, with a script that followed different themes, such as the lecturers' attitudes towards them and their practice in the classroom, the barriers that face them, recommendations for making their classes more inclusive, technologies that could contribute to their inclusion.

#### **2.4. Data Analysis**

An analysis of a wide range of qualitative data was conducted in this study. First, the researcher developed a coding scheme that would describe the participants' comments and responses. Coding is necessary for efficient analysis and, through it, the several replies may be reduced to a small number of classes which contain the critical information required for analysis. In this process, the researcher assigned numerals or other symbols to the participants' answers so that they can be put into a limited number of categories or classes. In other words, all comments which represent the same idea or the same thematic issues are grouped together in a category and are assigned a defining code. assigning codes tackled only the information that the researcher saw clearly and leaving any fragments of texts, that seemed to be more difficult, uncoded. Then, the researcher makes good use of a qualitative data analysis software to obtain detailed reports. This step in most researches uses a well-defined statistical formula in order to calculate the various percentages, coefficients, etc. These reports are later explained and commented on in order to answer the research questions

#### **3. Limitation of the study**

Before drawing any findings or conclusions from this study it is important to consider a number of limitations. To begin with, it is important to highlight the limited number of participants of this study. Reaching these learners was a slow and time-consuming process. In any case, a larger number of students would have been more desirable.

Another limitation of this study is that the data was obtained from a single university which is the university of Lounici Ali at Blida. So, it would be interesting to learn about the conditions of learners with disabilities in other universities, colleges and institutes in Algeria as well as tackling the perspectives of as academic and administrative staff.

#### **4. Results and Discussion.**

The findings of this study are provided in two sections. The first section tackles the learners with disabilities' perceptions of the learning environment of Blida 2 university and the difficulties that they face there. Their feedback is provided in the form of several

categories according to the themes tackled, such as the accessibility issues, teachers-related issues, teaching methodology and the use of the new technology resources. The section deals with their recommendations on how to make this learning environment more supportive to their special needs.

#### 4.1. *Learners' Perceptions of the Learning Environments and its Difficulties*

University, as a higher education institution, is a place for learning; however, in order to learn well, learners need to have easy access to its different facilities. The findings of this study highlight the participants' opinions of this learning environment and a number of issues that prohibit them from having an ideal place to learn. To begin with, the interviewed participants of this study pointed out a number of architectural barriers that they stumble on the premises of university and especially in the classrooms. For instance, students who take the university bus find themselves dropped at the university's bus station which is located at the lowest area of the university. Going to classroom from there means making extensive physical efforts "climbing" hills. Also, most of the times, the roads are not suitable for a person on a wheel chair or an impaired vision. The absence of ramps and the unfinished reconstruction projects caused several individuals to fall and have injuries. Furthermore, most of the students pointed out the importance of the physical organization of the classroom. They complained about the narrow aisles in classrooms and the fixed tables and platforms that complicate their passage and often oblige them to sit in the back. The students with impaired vision or hearing abilities emphasised the need for adequate lightening and acoustics especially in the amphitheatres. Nevertheless, some of the learners with disabilities indicated their appreciation for some departments that changed their classroom to ones that do not require taking the stairs to upper floors.

Once the learners with disabilities are in the classroom, their main priority is to take part in the lessons. From the viewpoints of these learners, teaching need to be designed to take into consideration their special individual needs and characteristics. Several respondents indicated that they cannot take part in the lesson or its activities because most of the times they are not designed for a learner with disability. For instance, the allotted time to do an activity is set for a normal student which a learner with disability often find insufficient. In addition, some participants stressed the importance of making the learning content more available and accessible using modern technologies. The results of this study confirm that learners with disabilities would find it beneficial if the teachers allowed the recording the class in the form

of audio or video, which would facilitate the accessibility of the learning content for the individuals who have taking-notes problems or might not be able to attend the classes on regular bases.

In this regard, a common criticism is made to the teaching methodologies practiced at Blida 2 university. While almost all the participants of the study pointed out that their teachers show compassion and sympathy, they indicated that some teachers seemed fearful or insecure about how to treat them. For this reason, these informants stressed that their teachers need to adapt an active and committed role in involving them in the lessons. The feelings of discrimination and helplessness is so enforced in these classrooms that some learners feel like “ghosts” in the classrooms. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of the students with disabilities, it was a matter of training deficiency rather than an inappropriate attitude towards them. Most of them realise that the incompatible lesson methodology or the discrimination in treatment or assessment do not stem from bad intentions but rather lack of adequate training in the field of special education. In other words, it is not a matter of not wanting to support them. Rather, it is a case in which they did not know or were unable to help because they lacked the proper training and the awareness in the needs derived from the various disabilities and the necessary adaptations for their inclusion in university life.

#### *4.2. Suggestions for Improvement:*

Based on the perceptions of learning environment of the learners with disabilities, concerned with this study, and the difficulties that they face during their university trajectory, a number of recommendations on how to improve this learning context have been suggested. To being with, most learners with disabilities at the level of Blida 2 university stressed the importance of having a fully accessible university premises with no physical barriers of any type which can be used and accessed to all, with no need for adaptation or specific design modification. Interestingly, the informant of this study highlighted that many of the physical barriers that they struggle with are also shared by students with no disabilities. So, according to them, fixing this issue serves the best of everyone. Also, from the viewpoint of the students with disabilities, it is important to boost orientation and mentoring at the various facilities of the university. The lack of information and guidance often results in the feeling of frustration and an intense desire to give up and drop out. So, paying a personalized attention to these learners strengthens their resilience and contribute to their personal as well as academic progress.

In addition, Bain (2004) stated that the teaching methodology has a tremendous effect on the quality of the acquired learning. Similarly, according to the students interviewed in this study, there is a need for a change in the teaching methodology to accommodate and cater for their individual needs. First, the informant of this study favoured a more participative approach that considers them as valuable members of the classroom and appreciate their contributions to the lessons. So, teachers are invited to make appropriate curricular adaptations and adopt a diverse repertoire of teaching methods using modern technologies and teaching aids to include these learners in their lessons. They should design their lesson plans and project works to attend to the classroom diversity and give more chances of learners with disabilities to participate. Also, the respondents of this study emphasized on providing learning materials ahead of time to allow them to do a preliminary personal work. Reading a document or preparing a lesson take more time and effort for them compared to their peers. Likewise, they stressed the need for implementing an appropriate alternative evaluation system and a more time during exams in order to have more equity with their classmates. Thus, for them, a teaching which is sustained by good practices is relevant and beneficial for all students and not only the ones with disabilities as Ferni & Henning (2006) point out.

In this context, like any other qualified professionals, it is crucial that teachers are trained in the field of special education to enable them to adequately perform their jobs. Such training should aim to make teachers more aware of the needs derived from each disability and how adapt their teaching respectively. Such training should also give them insights into the learning barriers and sociological framework of disability and inclusive education. Also, it can be very enriching for teachers to listen to the voice of these learners as they share their experience which can help them understand their needs and the inconveniences that hinder their learning. Such training would definitely change some of the negative attitudes towards disability held by some teachers and help them maintain confidence and an empathetic, positive attitude.

## Conclusions

This research has explored the overall perceptions of learning environment and learning barriers from the standpoint of Blida 2 university students with disabilities as well examined their recommendations for improving this learning context. It proved that the learning environment in Lounici Ali university still needs some improvement to meet the expectations of the learners with special needs. Different learning barriers have been highlighted by the informants of this study and a set of their recommendations have been reported. Indeed, as the number of learners with disabilities enrolling in higher education increases, all the member of colleges and universities are invited to knowledgeable regarding disability and become more proactive in creating an ideal learning environment that will allow these learners to achieve academic success regardless of their disabilities. It is decisive that they implement the recommendations of this study in order to make the Algerian higher education a reference of excellence.

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