



The Challenges Experienced by Visually Impaired Students in Moroccan Universities

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Abstract— *The current study aimed to investigate the challenges and barriers faced by visually impaired students in an educational environment, particularly in Moroccan universities. To identify these challenges and barriers, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 visually impaired students from the majority of Moroccan universities to explain the challenges these students experienced in their studies, mainly during the exam. Equally important, this research examines the impact of these challenges on the academic performance of this kind of population with disabilities in Morocco. The study found that visually impaired students experienced four main challenges in Moroccan Universities: administrative, academic, environmental, and social difficulties. Based on these findings, a set of recommendations to Moroccan policymakers was made to respond properly to the needs of persons with disabilities and deal with the challenges that visually impaired students face when learning and taking exams in higher education regularly. Indeed, this research will play a crucial role in raising the awareness of Moroccan universities about the meaning of inclusive education and the importance of creating an inclusive and diverse environment in which visually impaired students can lean equally as their non-visually impaired peers can.*

Keywords— *Visually impaired, inclusive education, discrimination, inequality, challenges.*



I. INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities, mainly visually impaired students, are among the most excluded and discriminated against groups in our societies in general and in Moroccan society in particular. Visually impaired students in Morocco experience various forms of discrimination and inequality based on gender, social status, age, and place of residence. In many Moroccan universities, visually impaired students encounter several complexities that present a challenge for them to start or even pursue their education. The lack of the main facilities and materials to meet the needs and support students with special disabilities is one of the challenges that contributes to making visually impaired students unwilling to attend schools or universities (Allam & Martin, 2021).

Before embarking on the main issue of the challenges faced by visually impaired students in Moroccan universities, it is useful to provide some background

information about the history of teaching visually impaired students from 19 century onwards in Morocco.

From 19 century onwards in Morocco, visually impaired students were neglected, marginalized, and considered a burden on Moroccan society that must be escaped from; they were excluded from Moroccan society, which holds negative attitudes and misconceptions about blind people; at that time, no schools or curricula were designed for fully sighted students; those later did not even receive support services from vision support teachers, classmates, or interventional measures to help them overcome their visual limitations.

Visually impaired students were superheated by non-visually handicapped students, and they were fully prevented from education and participating in school as their normal peers (Kroum & Benmassoud, 2017). Schools were not able to accept them for several reasons, including lack of training, experience, and education on how to teach

visually impaired students; teachers did not know how to deal with and teach those kinds of handicapped students; and they lacked appropriate techniques and materials to support and teach these people as equally as their normal classmates.

A few years ago, the movement of inclusive education emerged in Morocco, which aimed to integrate and incorporate visually impaired students into schools equally as their normal peers. This movement emphasizes the need to produce and adopt new teaching materials, approaches, styles, and routines to adapt to and familiarize VI students with the classroom environment. Indeed, this movement reflects that inclusive education is the main solution to help change society's negative vision toward blind people; it is also a great opportunity to prepare visually impaired students for their future roles in Moroccan society and create a kind of social integration, as Anne (2004) stated in her book, *The Gambia: Department of State for basic and secondary education*, that inclusive education is beneficial not only to blind students but also to all other students in schools because it enhances social integration (Anne, 2004).

Although inclusive education was considered a new system that emerged many years ago, it has not yet been implemented in many Moroccan higher institutions. This can be observed by the decreasing number of visually impaired students in public universities in Morocco, where most visually impaired students attend educational institutions and are taught using the same materials, approaches, teaching style, and routine, and examined in the same manner and the same subject content as their non-visually impaired peers. Therefore, this situation makes these students face many challenges and difficulties in their studies that may negatively affect their academic achievements. This situation raises several questions: What kinds of challenges do visually impaired students encounter at Moroccan universities? Do these challenges have any effect? Another way to formulate this question is to determine the extent to which Moroccan university staff and professors are aware of the challenges experienced by the visually impaired students.

The general purpose of this study is to determine the challenges and barriers experienced by visually impaired students in Moroccan universities, as this could help gain a better understanding of these challenges and work toward creating an inclusive environment where visually impaired students can learn equally as their non-visually impaired peers.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several scholars have discussed the challenges and difficulties experienced by visually impaired students, including blind and low-vision students, in an educational environment. Alianda Bwire Maindi (2018) stated that one of the biggest challenges facing visually impaired students in the educational environment is the science educational environment, which is fully designed for fully sighted students and delivered through sight-related tasks (Bwire Maindi, 2018). However, designing an expanded core curriculum is essential for developing and enhancing the skills and senses of visually impaired students to access information effectively. The expanded core curriculum (ECC) is an essential curriculum that is considered foundational to preparing visually impaired students for success as adults. Indeed, the ECC was formalized by Dr. Philip Hatlen in 1996 Based on nine components: Compensatory access, sensory efficiency, assistive technology, orientation and mobility, social interaction, self-determination, independent living, recreation and leisure and career education ('The expanded core curriculum Incorporating the best learning approaches for your child with blindness or vision impairment')

Lack of learning materials, such as audio tape, braille, enlarged print assistive devices, technology, and other materials and resources that support the needs of visually impaired students, is another challenge experienced by visually impaired students. In their article, challenges and opportunities to implement inclusive education Wondwosen Mitiku, Yitayal Alemu, and Semahegn Mengsitu (2014) indicated that the major challenge to the implementation of effective inclusive education was the lack of educational materials written in Braille and other supportive materials (Mitiku et al., 2014). Similarly, Etenesh (2000) suggested that the lack of materials and learning resources designed for visually impaired students is the main challenge in implementing inclusive education in Ethiopia (Etenesh, 2000). Drawing on the same dichotomy, Abebe Demisew (2014) stated that different factors destructively affect the implementation of inclusive education, including lack of awareness about disability, scarcity of resources, inappropriate curriculum, and shortage of trained and skilled teachers (Demisew, 2014).

The lack of trained and skilled teachers also hinders the learning development of visually impaired students. When teachers lack the competencies and skills to deal with and teach visually impaired students, they may encounter several challenges in their education. Baraka Michael Mwakyēja (2013) stated that teachers' incompetence and inefficiency play a major role in increasing the challenges and difficulties faced by visually impaired students

(Mwakyjeja, 2013). In this regard, the Ministry of Education must provide training programs for teachers to train and educate them on how to use sign language, braille materials, hearing aids, tactile diagrams, maps, and so forth.

The lack of inclusive education policies also affects the learning processes of visually impaired students. Although inclusive education was mentioned in Moroccan's policies (Naciri, 2022), its application remains very weak in both public and private schools, as well as in universities. Inclusive education policies are underutilized by teachers and staff members because of insufficient teaching methods, materials, and training for teachers, inspectors, and apprentices to make them better equipped to support this category of students, based on a careful assessment of these children and their learning speed.

The lack of assistant staff in schools and universities constitutes a major obstacle and challenge for this category of students, particularly on the day of the exam. Many visually impaired students in Morocco encounter a difficult challenge on the day of the exam, as they cannot find anyone to help them write on exam paper. However, some of them ask their classmates to assist them, but those later may have exams during the same period, or they may lack commitment and accuracy. Therefore, both schools and universities must pay great attention to this particular problem and work hard to provide frameworks and assistants for this category of students to support them on the exam day.

The lack of time necessary to understand the courses may also be considered a barrier to the learning and educational processes of visually impaired students. Students who are visually impaired are slow in the learning and understanding process (Kapur, 2018); they need time to understand information and complete their tasks and duties effectively. This makes it difficult for both VI students and teachers, because these later need to ensure that visually impaired students understand, listen carefully, and pay adequate attention to their classmates. Indeed, it may be necessary for teachers to consider the amount of time allotted to visually impaired students and give them the necessary time to understand the information, as well as enough time to answer the questions, especially on the day of the exam.

The lack of services, special units, and committees to support disabled persons in universities and schools is another obstacle for visually impaired students (Amin et al., 2021, p.736). However, a unit of service needs to be established in both schools and universities to meet the needs of visually impaired students in a more organized and effective manner, as well as to consider their demands

and solve any issues or problems concerning their learning. These special committees and units should not only work as consultants but also as monitors to ensure that every college, department, faculty, and language centre provides the necessary facilities and supportive services for visually impaired students.

Lack of acceptance and a welcoming environment are some of the greatest challenges encountered by visually impaired students and their caregivers. Receiving refusal and adequate attention can make it more difficult for visually impaired students and their families to acquire accurate information, knowledge, and skills to prepare for a successful career job. As a result of this rejection, visually impaired students feel that they have become a heavy burden on their parents and society in general, which reflects negatively on their psychological conditions. In his Article on challenges encountered by students with visual impairments and teachers in an integrated school environment, Borne Chepngetich Korir (2015) shed lights on several challenges that are experienced by visually impaired students, including the negative attitudes of the administration that consider visually impaired students as a burden to school; as a consequence, they do not meet their needs like providing the necessary learning materials even though they pay fees (Korir, 2015).

The lack of an inclusive environment at schools and universities also makes the learning of visually impaired students more challenging. Feeling neglected and unappreciated at schools and universities makes visually impaired students experience a kind of anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and isolation. When there is a lack of collaboration and interaction among students and teachers, visually impaired students feel isolated and alienated. Thus, it has a huge negative impact on their performance and skills in educational and learning processes (Sim, 2020).

Lack of parental support and participation also serves as a barrier to visually impaired students' development and learning processes. The majority of visually impaired students belong to low-income families and poor and marginalized families whose parents are often illiterate and do not possess the skills and abilities to reinforce learning and education among their visually impaired children. The income they receive is not enough for them to buy and provide their visually impaired children with the necessary assistive devices, technology, and other materials. Consequently, visually impaired student will not be able to achieve a kind of improvement and progress in their learning and educational process. Fauzia Khurshid and Sufiana Malik (2011) conducted a study on the perception

of visually impaired youth about familial, academic, and caregivers. They found that both visually impaired students males and females experienced a lack of social support from caregivers and visually impaired male students who stay long hours in hostels face more difficulties (Khurhid & Malik, 2013).

This is just a summary of the main challenges encountered by visually impaired students, as we cannot address all the difficulties in this short article, but rather this needs a broad study. However, researchers and scholars need to investigate other difficulties and challenges facing visually impaired students at the universities including administrative difficulties, academic difficulties, physical and environmental, and social difficulties.

This topic needs more attention to make society aware of the difficulties and challenges faced by this category of students and also to create an inclusive and diverse environment where people with or without visual disabilities come together and stimulating integration between them. To achieve such interaction it is necessary to eliminate as many thresholds as possible by providing initiatives that enlarge accessibility holds as possible.

III. METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews based on purposive sampling will be adopted to investigate the main challenges and barriers that encounter visually impaired students in the educational environment, particularly in Moroccan universities.

The semi-structured interview is considered and referred to as a conversation with a purpose (Burgess, 1984) it is a widely used technique and method in qualitative research, it focuses on conversational style to explore particular

themes, and to learn about the motivations behind people's choices and behaviours, their attitudes and beliefs. The semi-structured interview is a data collection method in which the interviewer does not follow a formalized lots of questions, but he or she asks participants a set of open-ended questions and follows them up to explore participants' thoughts and beliefs about a particular topic in more detail (Mashuri, Saepudin & Sarib, Muhammad & Alhabsyi, Firdiansyah & Syam, Hijrah & Ruslin, Ruslin, 2022). The advantage of the semi-structured interview is that:

The researcher can critically scrutinize the conversation and varied initially superficial responses during the SSI to arrive at multi-layered conclusions. A researcher can further follow up most of the time, all verbal and non-verbal responses, such as hunches, laughter, and silence, to reveal hidden information that may turn out to be helpful in the final data analysis of different themes extracted from the conversation (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, as cited in Kakilla, 2021).

The purposive sampling consisted of 15 students with visually impaired disabilities from different universities in Morocco. Purposive sampling is also known as judgment, selective or subjective sampling is a sampling technique by which the researcher uses his expertise and judgment to select a sample that is most useful to the purpose of the research. In his article, Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling, Etikan Ilker (2016) stated that the "researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by knowledge or experience" (Etikan, 2016, p.2).

Table 1:

Participant's number	Gender	Age	Year of study	Status of visual impairment
1	Female	19	2021	Blindness
2	Female	20	2021	Blindness
3	Female	22	2019	Blindness
4	Male	19	2021	Blindness
5	Female	18	2021	Blindness
6	Male	22	2019	Severe visual impairment
7	Male	30	2012	Blindness
8	Male	24	2017	Severe visual impairment
9	Male	19	2021	Severe visual impairment
10	Female	23	2020	Blindness
11	Female	28	2014	Blindness

12	Male	20	2018	Severe visual impairment
13	Male	25	2017	Blindness
14	Female	22	2019	Severe visual impairment
15	Female	26	2018	Blindness

1- Objective of this research

In this research the main objectives was to investigate the main challenges that encounter visually impaired students at Moroccan universities, in order to raise the awareness of policy makers, administrators and professors to find out possible and effective solutions to these challenges and barriers that encounter visually impaired students in educational environment particularly in universities.

2- Data collection

In this research the semi structured interview incorporated nine main questions, each being supplemented by possible follow up questions to draw out more specific evidence and to deepen the responses to a question and also to increase the richness of the data being obtained about the candidate's asset. The main questions prepared for the interviews were as follow:

Q 1 What are the administrative difficulties that you encounter in your university? Do you receive any kind of support and service from the administration? Do you find that the administration is able to meet all of your requirements?

Q2 What are the academic difficulties that you encounter at the university?

Q4 What are the most difficulties you encounter during the exam period?

Q5 Do you find that the time that professors allocate in explaining their lessons is sufficient for you to absorb the lessons?

Q6 As a visually impaired students, what are the environmental and physical difficulties that you encounter most?

Q7 what are the social difficulties that you encounter as visually impaired students with your teaching and administrative staff?

Q8 What are the social difficulties that you encounter with your peers of ordinary students?

Q9 Are there any other difficulties that you want to talk about?

IV. RESULTS

Concerning the administrative difficulties that face visually impaired students in universities, the majority of visually impaired students agreed that the administration does not take their needs and requirement seriously and this is due to the absence of the necessary means and facilities to respond to these challenges. Another difficulty that encounter visually impaired students are related to the absence of frameworks that are specialized in academic guidance, which makes them vulnerable to many social and psychological problems. At the beginning of each university year, visually impaired students need some kind of guidance and preparation to support them in their academic course. However, the absence of this guidance leads visually impaired students to feel alienated and surrounded by mixed feelings of fear and psychological instability.

Student (3) confirmed that:

When I went to the administration office to complete the registration process or to ask for my papers, the administration takes a lot of time to meet students' requests, especially us" she adds " there is a lack of communication and guidance, which make us feel unequal as the administration does not definitely and seriously respond to our requirement.

In relation to the academic difficulties that visually impaired students encounter, the majority of students agreed that the most prominent of those challenges are: the difficulty of competing with non-visually impaired students, the difficulty of taking exams, and the struggle of absorbing and understanding the educational material mainly those related to laboratories. However, these difficulties can be explained based on many direct or indirect factors, one of them is the loss of vision to perform well academically, the lack of commitment of some volunteer students or workers at the universities to support students on the day of the exam. Extra time allowance to completely understand the assignments, and integrate the information.

The lack of volunteers to write on the day of the exam is considered a big challenge and burden for students with visual impairment. Visually impaired students make a

great effort to find volunteer students to support them write on the day of the exam in addition to the lack of extra time allowance to complete their writing, students with low vision take a longer time to complete the dictation process. Therefore, the volunteer students' commitment and accuracy on the day of the exam play a great role in the writing process, especially in the English language, where students with visually disability are held responsible for the spelling errors committed by the volunteer students who are doing the writing process, which forces visually impaired students sometimes to spell some words for the students' writer, the things that lead to the expiration of the exam time.

Unlike European countries, visual impaired students in Morocco do not get any technical support like using computer to do exams with a headphone and software that can translate written questions into speech.

Student (7) claimed that

I find it hard to find someone who can help me write on the day of the exam because at that time the majority of students have exams or are busy preparing for their exams, in most cases, when we find students who can help, we may encounter other difficulties represented in the writing process, especially in French and English language where we have to dictate each word separately, and this requires a lot of additional time and effort.

Regarding the physical and environmental difficulties, the participants stated that the university facilities and buildings are not suitable for students with visual impairments, the learning environment is unpleasant for visually impaired students, and the classrooms are poorly equipped with appropriate equipment, materials, infrastructure, and facilities. Moreover, the university libraries lack the appropriate number of halls prepared for visually impaired students. Furthermore most disabled students rarely participate in the academic activities organized by the university because the building and facilities inside the university are not suited for their needs.

In our interview with student (15) who stated that

the corridors in which there are stairs are considered dangerous for me to go up and down and for all disabled students like me, in addition to other obstacles that can be found on the university sidewalks and roads such as digging, three branches and water drains.

Indeed, these challenges considered as a barrier to the freedom of movement of visually impaired students, a poorly built university environment would make education difficult for visually impaired students despite the effort made by the university administration and other parties to eliminate as much as possible these difficulties and reduce them, these difficulties are still existing in the majority of Moroccan universities.

As for the social difficulties that are represented in the relationship between visual impaired students and teaching and administrative staffs, the results indicated that the most important difficulty that encounter disability students is teacher's lack of skills and abilities to deal with visually impaired students, teachers are not educated and trained enough in the use of braille materials, preparation of hearing aids, tactile, diagrams, and maps and so forth, in addition to the administration's inappropriate treatment and lack of consideration of the circumstances and conditions of these students, and this may be due to the lack of sufficient experience of some faculty members and some administrative staffs in addition to the lack of knowledge of the impact of this kind of disability on students academically, psychologically and socially, also to the total absent of the necessary facilities that should be provided for a less restrictive environment including assistive devices, technology and other materials which stand as a barrier against teacher's desire to achieve inclusive teaching and the principle of equality for all students.

Student (4) claimed that

A large number of employees within the university administration do not know how to deal with us in particular, as they do not take our requests and needs into consideration.

About the social difficulties that are represented in the relationship between visually impaired students and their non-visually impaired peers, the study indicated that blinds students suffer from the negative attitudes and labelling of their non-disabled colleagues whether inside or outside the university, sometimes those later may use some inappropriate words while talking to these disabled students which indicate that university students do not have sufficient experience and awareness to deal appropriately with disabled students in general.

In our interview with student (6) indicated that

I was tired of the look of pity and the labelling that I receive from students everyday like 'the poor boy' " penniless" and " miserable" because of this, I decided to drop out of university.

As a result, visually impaired students find it hard to build a relationship with their non-disabled peers and due to these problems, they may develop negative attitudes towards educational institutions, subjects, materials, and institutional strategies. Due to negative attitudes, visually impaired students may even discontinue their education and drop out of university. Therefore, the misconceptions prevalent in society about people with disabilities and their needs and abilities represent a major obstacle to discovering the nature of how to deal with this category of students.

V. CONCLUSION

This study examines the challenges and barriers faced by visually impaired students in Moroccan universities. According to the analysis of the current study, it is clear that visually impaired students suffer from many difficulties in Moroccan universities, which is evident from the answers we obtained during the interviews conducted with the participants. First, and most importantly, administrative difficulties are represented by the lack of administrative support, guidance, and appropriate procedures. Second, academic difficulties, which are represented in competition with non-disabled students, performance during the examination, and a lack of understanding of educational materials. Moreover, environmental difficulties are represented by the lack of adequate reading holes in the library and classrooms, lack of accessibility on sidewalks and roads, and inability to participate in activities prepared by the university. Finally, social difficulties are presented as teachers' lack of consideration and the negative attitudes of their non-disabled colleagues. Therefore, this study indicates that these challenges may negatively impact the academic performance of visually impaired students.

Based on the findings above, we can conclude that the challenges experienced by visually impaired students in Moroccan universities did not pave the way for implementing inclusive education and an inclusive environment where students with or without a disability can interact with each other, and are helpful and friendly toward each other. Consequently, Moroccan university staff, teachers, policymakers, and stakeholders should work hard to overcome the challenges experienced by visually impaired students and create a quality-inclusive and diverse educational environment where students with disabilities can receive free and appropriate education.

The belief in the right to education is a belief in inclusion, because education for all means education for everyone. Students have different needs and requirements; they need expert teachers and professors who hold all the keys to

work more inclusively and a learning environment that has the necessary resources and basic care with a universal design where every student has the opportunity to learn. Indeed, inclusive education is not education as we mean in general, but it is the education of any student who is in a vulnerable situation, not only students with a disability but also multilingual students, students who have different religions, or students who have a low socioeconomic status and so forth.

VI. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the analysis, visually impaired students interviewed argued that these challenges greatly contributed to their poor performance in the university modules; they also claimed that due to these challenges, their performance was substantially worse than that of non-visually impaired students. Indeed, this poor performance stands as a burden and a stumbling block to the improvement and augmentation of learners' ambitions and professional aspirations. However, to eliminate the challenges faced by visually impaired students at universities, there are some recommendations that can be adopted to enhance their academic development, skills, and abilities, and to encourage them to pursue higher education like their non-disabled peers.

First, the university physical environment should be prepared and organized to suit visually impaired students in terms of corridors, sidewalks, stairways, bathrooms, walkways, elevators, toilets, slopes, and tactile blocks, based on universal design specifications. In addition, it reconsiders the problem of elevators and stairs and provides appropriate solutions to enable this category of students to move easily.

Second, preparing and equipping dedicated halls in university libraries to welcome visually impaired students to enable them to benefit from their facilities to continue their academic achievements.

Third, the number of social workers, counsellors, psychologists, and sign language interpreters in the student counselling department should be increased so that the psychological well-being of disabled students can be maintained and improved.

Fourth, they attract a group of supportive and volunteer students to support visually impaired students, and implement programs to educate and assist them.

Fifth, some cultural and social activities are suitable for students with disabilities, particularly visually impaired students, taking into consideration the location and nature of the disability.

Sharing awareness and understanding of the needs and rights of visually impaired students and providing a supportive and conducive environment.

Furthermore, setting up and establishing special units and committees that support the services and empowerment of visually impaired students in every public university is necessary so that their needs can be met in a more organized and effective manner.

Finally, some university laws and regulations were amended to suit the needs and requests of these categories of students.

Further research can be conducted in this field to investigate the perspectives of professors and administrators toward specific laws that can be amended to accommodate the needs of visually impaired students in universities, such as disability rights laws, digital accessibility, and assistive technology support.

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