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Disability in Lebanese higher education: unveiling students' experiences

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Introduction: The number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions is steadily rising worldwide. Meaningful inclusion requires understanding their lived experiences to identify both barriers and facilitators. In Lebanon, where an estimated 10–15% of the population has disabilities, research on inclusive practices in higher education remains limited.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the experiences of five university students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in different Lebanese HEIs. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to capture individual narratives, challenges, and enablers of inclusion.

Results: Findings revealed persistent barriers related to accessibility, communication, and inconsistent institutional support. Despite these challenges, participants highlighted the positive role of faculty, staff, and peers in fostering a sense of belonging and facilitating academic and social inclusion.

Discussion: The results underscore the need for systemic reforms to strengthen accessibility, enhance institutional support, and promote disability-sensitive practices in Lebanese HEIs. The study contributes to addressing a critical research gap and provides evidence to inform policy recommendations, guide interventions, and support future longitudinal research aimed at building inclusive learning environments in Lebanon.

KEYWORDS

disability, inclusion, higher education, student experience, qualitative design

Introduction

The experience of students with disabilities (SWDs) in higher education (HE) reflects a dynamic and evolving landscape, characterized by both significant progress and persistent challenges (Moriña, 2017). Over recent decades, the number of SWDs enrolling in higher education institutions (HEIs) has steadily increased, reflecting a growing emphasis on equality, diversity, and inclusion (Brewer et al., 2023). However, despite this progress, SWDs often face systemic barriers that hinder their academic success and full participation in HEIs such as barriers to accessing information, participating in class activities, and completing assessments. These challenges are compounded by difficulties in navigating administrative processes, disclosing disabilities, and managing the emotional toll of stigmatization (Toutain, 2019; Santos et al., 2019; Brewer et al., 2023). In response, institutions have expanded accommodations such as assistive technologies, additional time for exams, and tailored learning approaches. Yet, accessing these accommodations can be a complex and emotionally demanding process, which may present additional hurdles for SWDs (Christopher Toutain, 2019; Santos et al., 2019; Brewer et al., 2023).

Research on HEIs, disabilities, and inclusive education (IE) has predominantly focused on understanding the challenges shaping the experiences of SWDs globally. Studies generally fall into

three main areas: the obstacles and facilitators encountered by SWDs in HE; the transitions from school or college to higher education; and the concerns of students with “invisible” disabilities about disclosing their impairments (Moriña, 2017). These studies are often qualitative and predominantly feature SWDs with physical, intellectual, visual, and hearing disabilities (Fernández-Batanero et al., 2022).

While these issues have been widely documented in international contexts, less is known about how these challenges manifest in regions where research on inclusive education remains scarce.

Lebanon exemplifies this gap. Despite estimates that individuals with disabilities make up approximately 10–15% of the population, research on disability in higher education remains limited (UNDP, 2020). In recent years, Lebanon has taken important steps at the policy level to promote disability rights and inclusion. Notably, the country ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in February 2023, reinforcing its legal obligation to ensure inclusive education systems at all levels (Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), 2023). Furthermore, Law 220/2000 guarantees the right to education for individuals with disabilities, mandating equal access across all educational institutions. Complementing these efforts, the National Policy on Inclusive Education launched in 2023 outlines a comprehensive framework to transform Lebanon's education system into one grounded in equity, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and rights-based principles (Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), 2023). Despite these policy advances, implementation challenges persist.

While global studies have extensively explored the experiences, needs, and challenges of SWDs in HEIs, there is a noticeable gap in research specific to the Lebanese context, making it difficult to assess the extent to which local HEIs are equipped to accommodate SWDs (Wehbi, 2007). Existing studies on educational attainment among individuals with disabilities in Lebanon highlight significant disparities. A study by Thomas and Lakkis (2003) found that illiteracy rates were alarmingly high among younger respondents aged 14–26, with 23% classified as illiterate compared to just 3.7% in the general population aged 15–23. Additionally, only 10% of respondents obtained a university certificate, further illustrating the limited access to higher education (Thomas and Lakkis, 2003). A survey conducted in the Bekaa region echoed these concerns, reporting that 54% of people with disabilities completed intermediate school, 7% earned vocational certificates, and only 6% obtained a university degree, while 26% remained illiterate (Wehbi, 2007). These findings underscore the limited access to and achievement in education for people with disabilities in Lebanon.

Despite efforts to expand inclusive education, there remains a significant lack of research on the institutional readiness of Lebanese HEIs to support SWDs (Wehbi, 2007). Many universities continue to face challenges in creating safe, inclusive learning environments and providing the range of support services necessary for SWDs to thrive academically and socially (Van Loan, 2013). These difficulties are symptomatic of broader systemic barriers, including inadequate policy enforcement, resource constraints, and persistent societal stigma, all of which undermine equitable access to higher education for SWDs.

Importantly, these systemic issues are not isolated from institutional realities but are deeply embedded within them. The lack of binding inclusive education standards and the limited application of Universal Design principles in HEIs contribute to ongoing challenges such as inaccessible infrastructure, rigid curricular structures, and insufficient academic accommodations. The 2023

National Policy on Inclusive Education recognizes these gaps, highlighting persistent institutional obstacles such as weak inter-ministerial coordination, limited training for faculty and staff, and the continued reliance on parallel systems of inclusive and segregated education (Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), 2023). These structural shortcomings are reflected in the present study's findings, which reveal that SWDs frequently encounter barriers in accessing course materials, navigating institutional procedures, and achieving meaningful academic and social inclusion.

The study aims to explore and highlight the experiences of SWDs in Lebanese HEIs by identifying challenges, examining their academic and social engagement, and gathering insights for enhancing inclusivity. Its main objectives are to:

1. Understand the experiences of SWDs, including their backgrounds, academic journeys, and interactions within HEIs.
2. Identify key barriers and facilitators, focusing on access to resources, participation in academic and social activities, and the effectiveness of available accommodations.
3. Highlight successful practices and gather recommendations, showcasing effective support systems and strategies while providing insights to improve inclusivity in Lebanese HEIs.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative multiple case study design, which is well-suited for exploring diverse narratives and uncovering both unique and shared challenges faced by SWDs in HE. This approach provided a detailed and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences within the university context.

Study context

The Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) is a Lebanese HEI that accepts students with physical and learning disabilities and provides various support services to facilitate their academic success. Between 2015 and 2021, several surveys were conducted to assess the existing inclusive services and actions at USJ, with the goal of optimizing inclusion (Saint Joseph University of Beirut, 2021). These surveys targeted SWDs, students without disabilities (SWTDs), and faculty members, offering insights into the university's inclusion status at different stages: before admission, during studies, and after graduation.

The surveys provided valuable quantitative data on accessibility, academic accommodations, faculty support, and perceptions of inclusion. Before admission, they examined challenges in navigating application procedures, awareness of support services, and perceived barriers to entry. During their time at USJ, they investigated classroom accessibility, academic accommodations, faculty support, and social inclusion, as well as experiences of stigma or discrimination. After graduation, they assessed the impact of disability on job opportunities and career preparedness, evaluating whether USJ had adequately equipped SWDs for professional life.

Beyond individual experiences, the surveys explored general attitudes toward SWDs from students without disabilities (SWTDs) and faculty members, assessing faculty accommodations and peer interactions. SWDs' perspectives on their treatment, inclusion, and challenges in university life were also examined.

Despite the valuable insights gained, the surveys had limitations, particularly in capturing the depth and complexity of SWDs' lived experiences. While they provided a broad overview of inclusion at USJ, they did not fully explore how students navigate barriers, perceive institutional support, or make decisions about their academic and social engagement. By documenting personal narratives, this study aims to uncover the nuanced realities of inclusion and exclusion, highlight successful practices, and identify persistent gaps that require targeted intervention.

In doing so, it provides a deeper foundation for enhancing policies and support structures in Lebanese HEIs.

Sampling and data collection

Data for this study were collected through five semi-structured individual interviews conducted in March 2023. The interview questions were informed by previous research (Van Loan, 2013; Kendall, 2016) and structured around key thematic areas to guide in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. These themes addressed academic and social accessibility, institutional support, stigma, physical and digital barriers, communication challenges, and coping strategies. Participants were also encouraged to offer practical recommendations for enhancing institutional policies, support services, and inclusive campus practices. Interviews lasted between 40 and 56 min, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. All recordings were securely destroyed following transcription to maintain confidentiality.

Recruitment took place over a two-month period using multiple strategies. Invitation emails were disseminated through USJ's mailing lists to current students and alumni, resulting in the recruitment of one participant. Additionally, focal persons from USJ's Beirut, North, and South campuses were contacted by phone and asked to distribute the invitation within their student communities, leading to the participation of two more students. Finally, limited snowball sampling was employed: students who had agreed to participate referred to peers who might be interested, through which two additional participants were recruited. Despite these varied efforts, recruitment was challenging due to factors such as concerns over confidentiality, reluctance to disclose disability-related experiences, academic stress, and stigma.

Although a larger sample was initially targeted, the five participants included in this study provided a diverse representation of disability types—physical, sensory, and learning—and their accounts were rich in detail and insight. The sample size aligns with established qualitative research standards (GUEST et al., 2006; Creswell, 2013), which prioritize data depth and thematic saturation over numerical generalizability.

Inclusion criteria for this study ensure that participants can provide relevant insights into the experiences of SWD in HEIs in Lebanon. Eligible participants include current students or recent graduates from USJ who have completed at least one academic semester, ensuring they have sufficient experience within HE. Additionally, participants must provide informed consent and express a willingness to share their experiences, as their voices are crucial to understanding the challenges and facilitators of inclusion in HEIs.

The exclusion criteria for this study focus on ensuring a clear research scope. Students with intellectual disabilities (ID) were excluded from this study, as gathering feedback from students with ID requires a different research approach due to their potential communication challenges and varied support needs.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for exploring participants' personal experiences and the meanings they ascribe to them. The process began with familiarization, during which the first author repeatedly read the verbatim transcripts to become deeply immersed in the data. This was followed by generating initial codes, done manually using a deductive approach informed by the semi-structured interview guide. In searching for themes, related codes were grouped under broader thematic categories, reflecting recurring issues across the interviews. While reviewing themes, these categories were refined to ensure coherence and consistency. In defining and naming themes, five core themes were developed: participant backgrounds, general perceptions of university life, challenges and opportunities, identified needs, and participant-driven recommendations. Finally, producing the report involved contextualizing the themes within the broader literature and study objectives and selecting illustrative quotes to support each theme.

Saturation was judged to have been reached by the fourth interview, at which point no new codes or insights were emerging. This judgement was made informally based on the repetition of ideas across transcripts and confirmed during the analysis of the fifth interview, which reinforced existing themes.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, all coding was conducted manually by the first author and subsequently discussed with the two co-authors to review theme development and interpretation. Through collaborative discussions, discrepancies in coding or thematic emphasis were resolved by consensus. This process helped enhance analytical transparency and consistency. Although no formal audit trail was kept, coding decisions and theme definitions were regularly reviewed and recorded to ensure clarity and traceability.

The research team consisted of three female researchers with backgrounds in public health. One of the co-authors has prior professional experience working with qualitative research methods related to disability. This positionality brought both sensitivity and insight into the research, particularly regarding accessibility and inclusion in higher education. To manage potential bias, the team engaged in regular discussions throughout the analysis phase to reflect on assumptions, interrogate interpretations, and ensure that participants' voices remained central to the findings. These collaborative reflexive practices supported the credibility of the analysis and strengthened the interpretative process (see Table 1).

Results

Tables 2–5 offer a structured summary that captures challenges encountered, accommodations provided, service gaps, coping strategies, and recommendations for improvement as shared by the

TABLE 1 Participant demographics.

Participant	Disability type	Details	Gender
1	Physical disability	Bilateral limb displacement and scoliosis	Male
2	Sensory disability	Blindness	Female
3	Learning disability	Difficulties related to memory, attention, and concentration problems	Female
4	Learning disability	Dysgraphia: neurological disorder characterized by writing disabilities	Female
5	Learning disability	Difficulties related to memory, attention, and concentration problems	Male

TABLE 2 Results for physical disability.

Aspect	Details
Characteristics	Physical disability (visible) requires equipment like a wheelchair; Participant 1.
Challenges	• Mobility issues navigating campus. • Inaccessible laboratories and cafeterias (e.g., no ramps, high counters). • Poor parking facilities for wheelchair users.
Accommodations	• Accessible toilets are available on some campuses. • Inclusive academic, financial, and social services offered across all campuses.
Insufficient services	• Lack of consistent physical accessibility across campuses. • Need for inclusive sports and improved information sharing with staff and professors.
Adaptation strategies	• Established an inclusion club to raise awareness. • Sought help for mobility tasks while promoting education about disabilities.
Recommendations	• Hire an inclusion specialist to identify and resolve accessibility gaps. • Train staff in effective interaction with individuals with disabilities.

participants based on their specific type of disability. The results are also presented by key themes derived from participants’ narratives and supported by direct quotes and summarized data.

Participants’ profiles and challenges

Case 1 is a 26-year-old Lebanese male Alumni with a formal diagnosis of a physical disability involving bilateral limb displacement. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry from the university. His experience highlighted significant structural barriers, particularly

TABLE 3 Results for sensory disability.

Aspect	Details
Characteristics	Sensory disability (visual impairment); Participant 2.
Challenges	• Disorganized university system (no formal disability framework). • Lack of accessible academic programs. • Anxiety navigating unfamiliar buildings.
Accommodations	• Adjusted program requirements (e.g., replacing inaccessible courses). • Exam accommodation (oral exams, screen readers, peer assistance).
Insufficient services	• Lack of orientation and mobility training for blind students. • Minimal preparatory support for navigating campuses independently.
Adaptation strategies	• Developed assertiveness over time to communicate needs. • Built a strong support network of friends, family, and mentors.
Recommendations	• Offer orientation services and mobility training for visually impaired students. • Establish a database of SWDs for future reference.

TABLE 4 Results for learning disability.

Aspect	Details
Characteristics	Learning disability involving challenges in reading, writing, and organizational skills; Participants 3 and 4.
Challenges	• Participant 3: Positive support from staff and professors. • Participant 4 and 5: Lack of accommodation (e.g., denied use of computers during exams).
Accommodations	• Participant 3: Rescheduled exams during health issues. • Participant 4: Limited accommodation, often requiring advocacy and persistence to receive them.
Insufficient services	• Lack of dedicated support offices for students with difficulties. • Poor communication about available resources, such as computer labs for exams.
Adaptation strategies	• Participants 3 and 5: Chose a major that supported personal growth. • Participant 4: Relied on goodwill and direct communication with professors.
Recommendations	• Integrate medical professionals to increase awareness. • Reduce memory-based exam requirements. • Ensure confidentiality of accommodation.

in accessing laboratory spaces, which were physically inaccessible to non-ambulatory students. Although instructors were generally supportive and willing to adapt teaching methods, the lack of inclusive infrastructure prevented his full participation in coursework. As he explained, “*For instance, I can mention the laboratories in [one of the campuses]. If a person cannot walk, they cannot access the laboratory and, consequently, cannot attend classes.*”

Case 2 is a 30-year-old Lebanese female Alumni with a formal diagnosis of blindness. She holds a master’s degree in Translation. Her

TABLE 5 Barriers and enablers across disability types.

Dimension	Physical disability	Sensory disability	Learning disability
Barriers	Inaccessible infrastructure Exclusion from sports activities Lack of adapted transport	Lack of orientation/ mobility training Course material inaccessible (e.g., no braille/audio) Limited structured institutional support	Fast-paced learning and memory demands Inconsistent accommodations Stigma around disclosure
Enablers	Supportive professors in certain contexts Recognition of talents	Faculty empathy and respect for academic commitment	Some faculty flexibility Improved outcomes after open communication

primary challenges involved limited access to course materials in accessible formats such as braille or audio. While some professors accommodated her needs through lecture recordings and allowed the use of assistive technologies, institutional support was inconsistent. The absence of orientation and mobility training significantly affected her independence on campus. Reflecting on her first days at the university, she shared: “When USJ knew they had a blind student coming, even if it takes extra resources, they should have provided someone to teach me how to find different places. Instead, I was left alone and did not even know how to find the toilet on my first day.”

Case 3 is a 20-year-old Lebanese female student formally diagnosed with a learning disability affecting memory, attention, and concentration. She is currently enrolled in a bachelor’s program in Special Education. Her difficulties were especially pronounced during timed assessments and multitasking activities such as simultaneous translation exercises. Despite developing her own coping strategies, including mnemonic tools and collaborative studying, she received minimal formal support. The absence of consistent accommodations, particularly extended time for assessments, negatively impacted her academic performance. She noted, “No matter how hard I tried to memorize and learn, I always ended up forgetting everything.”

Case 4 is a 22-year-old female student from France, formally diagnosed with dysgraphia—a neurological condition affecting writing. She is currently enrolled in a master’s program in Philosophy and participated in an academic exchange at USJ. Compared to the structured accommodations she had access to at her home institution, her experience at USJ was marked by inconsistent support. Some instructors allowed typed submissions, while others denied this accommodation, placing her at a disadvantage during written exams. She heavily relied on peers for handwritten notes, which further emphasized the lack of institutional assistance. Describing her frustration, she stated, “It felt as if they were asking a person without legs to walk. I really wanted to try my best, but the situation made it impossible.”

Case 5 is a 23-year-old Lebanese male student formally diagnosed with a learning disability affecting memory, attention, and concentration. He is currently enrolled in a bachelor’s program in History – International Relations. His primary challenges emerge

during examinations, where he requires extended time to adequately process and respond to questions. What distinguishes his experience is the contrast between two faculties within the same university. Initially enrolled in a Marketing program, he encountered limited institutional support and inadequate accommodations, which negatively affected his academic well-being. Reflecting on this period, he shared, “I’m now studying something I enjoy, and I feel better supported. In my first year, while I was studying Marketing, the faculty administration did not provide the necessary accommodations, and I did not feel well supported.”

Main findings

Experiences in HE: unique challenges and diverse needs

While most participants characterized their overall university experience as “good,” their reflections revealed a stark contrast between their general academic engagement and their experiences specifically related to disability. This duality was particularly clear in the narrative of Participant 4, who stated:

“Academically and socially, I enjoyed being at USJ. But as a student with a disability, it was very challenging. I felt supported in general, but not when it came to my actual needs.”

This insight reflects a broader pattern: students appreciated the academic environment but felt that inclusion for SWDs remained inconsistent and sometimes superficial. Participants with physical disabilities, like Participant 1, encountered infrastructural and mobility challenges; those with sensory disabilities faced navigation and material accessibility issues; and students with learning disabilities reported barriers in academic accommodations and self-disclosure.

Participant 3’s journey highlighted how emotional and psychological well-being intersect with academic performance. She described a gradual improvement in her experience once she began opening up and receiving support:

“Opening up about my condition was crucial because even small tasks seemed challenging in my mind and discussing them alleviated some of the burden.”

Disability type shapes the nature of the barrier

A central finding of this study is that the type of disability directly shaped the form of challenge encountered, requiring equally tailored solutions. Participant 1 struggled with physical access:

“I had to park my car far away... The path was steep and dangerous, so I wore gloves and a helmet to avoid falling.”

Participant 2, who is blind, reported a total lack of structured orientation support:

“I did not even know how to find the toilet on my first day.”

For students with learning disabilities, the challenges were more cognitive and institutional. Participant 3 faced difficulties in fast-paced, memory-dependent coursework. As a translation major, she

struggled in simultaneous interpretation tasks where rapid recall and focus are critical.

The findings point to a disconnect between available services and the specific needs of students, suggesting that USJ's inclusion measures do not yet fully reflect the principle of individualized support.

Disability disclosure in HE: decision-making and choices

The decision to disclose a disability in HE is deeply personal and often influenced by various factors, including perceived stigma, institutional support, and the desire for accommodation. SWDs may choose different approaches when revealing their needs, balancing their right to privacy with the potential benefits of receiving tailored support.

When questioned about disclosing their disability upon entering USJ, most participants (4 out of 5) responded affirmatively. They expressed their desire to ensure that necessary preparations were made in advance to accommodate their needs. However, the manner in which they chose to disclose their disability varied among the participants. Participants 1 and 5, for example, actively approached the Dean, advocating for specific accommodation such as a designated parking zone, accessible toilets and extra time during exams. While participants 2 and 4 disclosed their disability in their cover letter and admission form, respectively.

Interestingly, participant 3 decided not to mention her disability, explaining: *"I was never asked about any difficulties. If they had asked, I would have been upfront about it from the beginning. However, since they never inquired, I chose not to mention it."*

She further elaborated on her decision to keep her disability to herself. She candidly shared *"I used to feel embarrassed about my situation, as if it were some strange illnesses. I did not feel comfortable sharing it with others, fearing that they might view me as weird."*

Additionally, her major, which centers on assisting others in developing academic skills, created a sense of hesitancy in revealing her own need for help. The lack of confidence in herself, especially at the outset, served as another deterrent in seeking assistance.

The study also highlights the challenges SWDs face when disclosing their disabilities due to fears of stigmatization or being perceived as incapable. Participant 5, for example, chose to keep his condition private from classmates and only informed the department director to request accommodations. He explained that he avoided telling friends *"Because not everyone understands. Some people might think I'm making it up to gain an advantage."* Moreover, participants emphasized the need for structured inclusion frameworks that provide clear processes for requesting accommodation while protecting their privacy and dignity. As one participant suggested, *"The university should let the journey we have lived be helpful for the next student with a disability, so they do not feel like they are the first."*

Coping with disability in HE: resilience and adaptation strategies

The resilience of SWDs was a recurring theme in the study, with participants demonstrating remarkable adaptability in overcoming challenges. Strategies ranged from building strong peer support networks to educating others about disabilities through sports and open discussions. One participant shared how they transitioned from being an introvert to becoming more assertive and confident in advocating for their needs: *"In my third and fourth years, I changed my*

approach, proactively informing professors about my condition and stating my needs."

Reaction of the HE community to SWDs: support and lack of awareness

The reactions of classmates, staff, and professors towards SWDs varied, reflecting both positive support and notable gaps in understanding. While no participant reported experiencing overt discrimination or negative behavior, their experiences highlighted both encouraging and disappointing responses shaped by attitudes, awareness, and situational factors.

Positive reactions: supportive communities and encouraging professors

Participants 2 and 3 shared experiences of supportive and empathetic interactions within their academic environments. Participant 3 described a particularly meaningful experience with a professor who noticed changes in her classroom behavior, such as sitting alone and reduced participation. The professor's perceptiveness and concern—*"Physically, you are present in class, but mentally, you seem absent"*—encouraged her to disclose her disability and seek support. This intervention marked a turning point, fostering a sense of trust and openness. Moreover, participant 2 also highlighted positive interactions with professors and staff, attributing their supportive behavior to her proactive and dedicated approach to academics. She believed that her commitment to academic excellence positively influenced their responses. She expressed that SWDs often feel the need to demonstrate their dedication to reassure professors of their worthiness of support, stating: *"Yes, I may need more assistance due to my disability, but I assure you that I will make it worthwhile by being a dedicated and high-achieving student."*

Negative reactions: knowledge gaps and indifference

Despite the absence of overt discrimination, Participants 1 and 4 highlighted a significant lack of awareness and understanding from staff and professors. Participant 1 recounted an incident where he was excluded from participating in a basketball game by a staff member who ignorantly stated, *"You cannot play in a wheelchair!"* He emphasized that physically disabled individuals can participate in sports, especially using adapted wheelchairs designed for such activities. This experience underscored the importance of staff education in inclusive and adaptive sports. Additionally, participant 4 expressed frustration with her professors' attitudes, particularly their indifference toward providing accommodations. Despite her active class participation and outstanding effort, one professor, who had previously praised her request for accommodation during an exam, stated: *"You can cheat on the computer."* She found this lack of empathy deeply disappointing, especially given her proven dedication and hard work.

A significant finding of the study is the widespread inconsistency in awareness and understanding of SWDs' needs within the university community. This gap hinders effective integration and often results in inadequate communication about available resources. As one participant observed, *"I did not know where to turn for help, and the*

staff never showed up, even though they said they were available.” While some support mechanisms exist, their effectiveness varies significantly.

At the same time, the role of support systems emerged as a double-edged sword in participants’ experiences. Many expressed gratitude for the assistance provided by professors, staff, and peers, which helped them navigate challenges. One participant shared, *“The main source of support came from the professors and staff who frequently checked in on me and offered assistance when needed.”* However, when such support was inconsistent or absent, it exacerbated their difficulties. Another participant recounted, *“They did not understand that I could not be treated the same as other students because my circumstances were different.”*

Contradictory experiences within the same institution: the case of participant 5

Participant 5’s experience adds further nuance to these varied reactions, illustrating how institutional responses can be both supportive and inadequate, sometimes within the same university. As a student with a learning disability, he described having had two contrasting experiences across different faculties. In one, accommodations were limited and insufficient—he was granted only 15 extra minutes during exams. In the other, he was allowed half-time, which he felt was more appropriate for his needs. Reflecting on this disparity, he suggested that support might depend less on policy and more on individual attitudes, remarking, *“It depends on people’s minds.”* He shared: *“I informed the university about my condition. In the beginning, they seemed supportive, but over time I noticed they were not offering the help I needed.”* His case highlights how the mindset of faculty or administrative staff can significantly shape the actual implementation of accommodations, even when institutional support appears to exist in principle.

Success stories

The following success stories illustrate the participants’ achievements and positive experiences during their time at USJ. These stories highlight academic progress, meaningful relationships, personal growth, and moments of pride—each contributing to their overall university journey.

Academic engagement and institutional appreciation (participant 4)

Participant 4 shared several success stories reflecting both academic and personal achievements. Academically, she found some courses particularly engaging and was highly motivated to participate in them. She also expressed her deep appreciation for USJ and Lebanon, describing the country as close to her heart. This sense of belonging contributed to her positive overall experience.

On a relational level, she noted a significant difference between USJ and the French educational system. At USJ, she experienced a stronger sense of closeness with professors, fostering trust and extensive interaction. Participant 4 thoroughly valued this aspect of her academic journey, emphasizing how a supportive and connected community enriched her university experience.

Support networks and personal growth (participant 3)

Participant 3 identified success as the supportive environment created by professors and staff, which significantly impacted her academic journey. She credited their continuous check-ins and readiness to assist her with helping her feel less isolated and more motivated to excel academically.

Additionally, she highlighted a personal milestone: overcoming the stigma of her disability by opening up about her condition. By sharing her challenges and seeking support, she reduced the mental burden associated with daily tasks, which empowered her to cope better with difficulties and pursue her goals more effectively.

Talent and recognition (participant 1)

For Participant 1, a key moment of success occurred during a university talent show, which he described as the most memorable part of his USJ experience. He proudly recounted winning first place in the first competition and third place in the second. Beyond personal recognition, he valued how the event provided a platform for himself and others to showcase their talents. This experience symbolized success not only in personal achievement but also in advocating for inclusivity, where everyone had the opportunity to express their unique abilities.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of SWDs at a Lebanese HEI, highlighting both positive interactions and persistent structural and social barriers to full inclusion. While participants generally appreciated their academic experiences and faculty support, their testimonies revealed a university environment where accessibility and disability support remain inconsistently implemented. These findings align with previous research emphasizing the gap between policy rhetoric and the realities of meaningful inclusion in higher education (Francis et al., 2019; O’Toole, 2020).

Navigating dual reality: inclusion and exclusion

Participants consistently expressed satisfaction with their academic journeys, particularly the supportive attitudes of individual professors and peers. However, this sense of belonging sharply contrasted with ongoing barriers related to infrastructure, pedagogical inflexibility, and uneven institutional support. This duality—being welcomed as students yet marginalized as SWDs—reflects what Zambrano (2016) describes as “parallel systems” within universities, where inclusive rhetoric coexists with exclusionary practices (Zambrano, 2016).

Physical disabilities exposed infrastructural deficits such as inaccessible laboratories, steep pathways, and lack of adapted seating. Sensory disabilities highlighted the absence of orientation services and assistive materials. Meanwhile, students with learning disabilities struggled with cognitive overload in rigid academic environments. These distinctions confirm that “one-size-fits-all” approaches to disability inclusion are insufficient, and that nuanced, disability-specific interventions are necessary.

The experiences of participants in this study can be understood through the lens of the social model of disability, which frames the barriers faced by SWDs not as a result of individual impairments, but as consequences of institutional structures, physical environments, and social attitudes that fail to accommodate diversity (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2006). This model helps explain the paradox of inclusion and exclusion within the same academic space: while students may feel welcomed interpersonally, the broader university system remains largely inaccessible by design. Furthermore, these experiences illustrate how ableism operates in higher education—often invisibly—through assumptions of normative ability, rigid academic expectations, and the devaluation of alternative ways of learning and engaging (Dunn and Dolmage, 2017). Understanding these experiences as products of ableist structures rather than personal shortcomings demands a shift in institutional responsibility, from expecting students to adapt, to reshaping the university itself.

Disclosure: between stigma and survival

The decision to disclose a disability in the university context emerged as one of the most sensitive and complex aspects of the student experience. For many participants, disclosure was not a straightforward administrative step but a deeply emotional and strategic decision, shaped by fear of stigma, desire for fairness, and the urgent need for support.

Some students, recognizing that their academic success depended on accessing accommodation, chose to disclose their conditions early. They hoped that transparency would trigger appropriate institutional support and facilitate a smoother academic journey. For instance, Participant 1 proactively advocated physical accommodation upon admission, resulting in the creation of a parking space and the installation of ramps. Such outcomes demonstrate the potential benefits of early disclosure when met by a responsive institutional environment.

However, other participants hesitated to disclose their disabilities due to fears of judgement, pity, or being perceived as “less capable.” Participant 3, for example, refrained from disclosing her learning difficulties until academic struggles became overwhelming. She described initially feeling ashamed, equating her condition with personal failure: “*I used to feel embarrassed about my situation, as if it were some strange illnesses.*” This highlights the significant emotional burden students bear when deciding whether—and when—to reveal their needs.

The ambiguity surrounding disclosure stems partly from the absence of clear, formalized disclosure pathways within the university. Without visible, structured, and confidential systems, students are left to navigate disclosure informally, often relying on their own judgement about when, how, and to whom to disclose. As Francis et al. (2019) note, voluntary disclosure must always be respected, but institutions must create environments where disclosure feels safe, empowering, and non-stigmatizing—not a survival strategy forced by crisis (Francis et al., 2019).

Moreover, participants’ experiences suggest that disclosure outcomes were highly dependent on individual faculty members’ attitudes. In supportive environments, disclosure opened the door to flexibility and understanding. In less supportive environments, it exposed students to doubt or misunderstanding, sometimes worsening feelings of isolation. These findings are not unique to the Lebanese context. International research confirms that the decision to disclose a disability is often fraught

with emotional and strategic tension, particularly in higher education settings where fear of stigma, lack of institutional clarity, and inconsistent support mechanisms persist as global challenges. For example, Goodall et al. (2022) highlights that disclosure is a widely recognized barrier in the transition from education to employment for SWDs, underscoring the critical role institutions must play in establishing safe and empowering disclosure environments. Such evidence reinforces the need for formalized, confidential, and stigma-free pathways that encourage voluntary disclosure and offer consistent support thereafter (Goodall et al., 2022).

Informal support networks: helpful but insufficient

Throughout this study, participants highlighted how much their academic success and well-being often relied not on formal institutional mechanisms, but on the goodwill of individual professors, staff, or peers. Positive experiences frequently arose from *ad hoc* acts of kindness: professors who informally adjusted deadlines noticed a student’s difficulties or initiated private conversations to offer help. Such support often makes a decisive difference in students’ ability to persist academically and socially.

However, this reliance on informal support exposed profound systemic weaknesses. Participants consistently reported that accessing necessary accommodation was unpredictable, contingent on individual attitudes rather than guaranteed by institutional policy. While some professors demonstrated remarkable sensitivity, others exhibited skepticism, misunderstanding, or even resistance—particularly when students requested non-standard accommodations, such as assistive technology use during exams or alternative assessment methods.

This inconsistency reveals a broader institutional problem: the absence of codified, enforceable structures to ensure equitable support for all students with disabilities. When inclusion depends on the discretion of individuals rather than systemic mandates, students are subjected to unequal experiences and must navigate an unpredictable landscape of support.

Moreover, informal support—while beneficial in the short term—carries risks. It leaves students vulnerable to the personal biases, goodwill, or misunderstandings of staff members. It also places the burden of negotiating, explaining, and advocating for needs squarely on students themselves, rather than positioning the institution as the proactive provider of accessible learning environments.

As noted by Francis et al. (2019), truly inclusive universities must move beyond isolated acts of accommodation and embed disability inclusion into their structural, cultural, and procedural frameworks. Staff and faculty development programs must address not only procedural aspects of accommodation but also the deeper shifts in attitudes, assumptions, and practices required to build genuinely inclusive environments (Francis et al., 2019).

Resilience, self-advocacy, and the burden of adaptation

Amid persistent barriers, participants in this study consistently demonstrated exceptional resilience and self-advocacy. Many

described how, in the absence of systematic institutional support, they developed their own coping mechanisms: employing assistive technologies independently, creating peer support networks, modifying study strategies, and proactively informing professors of their needs. Over time, participants became more confident in articulating their rights and advocating for reasonable accommodation.

These narratives reflect a powerful story of personal strength, adaptability, and agency. However, while such individual achievements are admirable, they also expose a troubling reliance on students' ability to "make the system work" for themselves—rather than the system being designed to support them equitably from the outset.

When universities depend on students' resilience to bridge the gaps in infrastructure, pedagogy, and services, they shift the burden of adaptation onto those already navigating significant challenges. As Participant 3 described, it was only after years of struggle that she found the courage and strategy to approach professors proactively: *"In my third and fourth years, I changed my approach, proactively informing professors about my condition and stating my needs."*

This delayed empowerment leads to a systemic failure to provide early, structured pathways for support.

Moreover, framing resilience as the primary success factor for SWDs risks masking institutional shortcomings. As [Zambrano \(2016\)](#) argues, the true measure of an inclusive university is not how well students adapt to barriers, but how few barriers they encounter in the first place. Systemic resilience—manifested through inclusive infrastructure, responsive policies, and trained faculty—should be the foundation that enables all students to thrive without having to "fight" for basic access ([Zambrano, 2016](#)).

Toward systemic inclusion: institutional imperatives

The findings of this study underscore that achieving genuine inclusion for SWDs in HEIs demands more than isolated improvements or good intentions. It requires comprehensive, systemic reform that addresses the structural, pedagogical, social, and cultural barriers students continue to face.

Drawing directly from participants' experiences, this study identifies six interrelated domains where reform is urgently needed:

Reconstructing accessible infrastructure

Participants with physical disabilities, such as Participant 1, consistently described the dangers and frustrations of navigating inaccessible campuses—from steep, hazardous pathways to laboratories and cafeterias inaccessible by wheelchair. Removing architectural barriers must be treated not as an optional enhancement but as a fundamental prerequisite for inclusion. Investment in adapted pathways, accessible laboratories, inclusive parking facilities, and accessible restrooms is essential. As [O'Toole \(2020\)](#) emphasizes, physical accessibility forms the foundation upon which all other aspects of participation are built ([O'Toole, 2020](#)).

Embedding inclusive pedagogy and assistive technology

Participants with learning disabilities highlighted a critical gap between traditional teaching methods and diverse learning needs. Rigid course structures, heavy reliance on time-pressured written assessments, and lack of accessible materials created unnecessary barriers. Adopting Universal Design for Learning principles, offering alternatives to timed exams, and systematically integrating assistive technologies can ensure that curricula are designed with diversity in mind from the outset, rather than retrofitting accommodations after students struggle ([Roundtree, 2017](#)).

Formalizing disclosure and accommodation pathways

The decision to disclose a disability often placed participants in vulnerable positions, with no clear guarantees of confidentiality or consistent support. Universities must establish transparent, student-centered disclosure systems that protect privacy, ensure timely accommodations, and avoid burdening students with repetitive justifications for their needs. Proactive communication about available support services should begin before enrolment and continue throughout students' academic journeys.

Comprehensive faculty and staff training

Participants' experiences revealed that even well-meaning faculty members often lacked the knowledge or confidence to provide appropriate support. Training must go beyond legal compliance to foster genuine understanding of the lived experiences of SWDs, tackle implicit biases, and promote inclusive practices at all levels of university life. As [Francis et al. \(2019\)](#) argue, effective training should be continuous, compulsory, and embedded within broader institutional development plans ([Francis et al., 2019](#)).

Strengthening transition and orientation support

The transition into university life can be particularly daunting for students with sensory, mobility, or learning disabilities. Participants described facing orientation challenges alone, without adequate guidance or mobility support. Structured, disability-sensitive transition programs—including campus tours, early engagement with disability services, and accessible information sessions—can significantly ease the adjustment period and foster a greater sense of belonging ([O'Toole, 2020](#)).

Building robust support networks

Social and academic support networks emerged as vital enablers of student persistence and success. Universities should invest in formalized peer mentoring schemes, inclusive student organizations, and accessible counselling services. Such structures

not only provide essential emotional scaffolding but also foster inclusive campus cultures that normalize diversity rather than marginalizing it.

Standardizing and monitoring accommodation practices

Currently, the provision of accommodation remains highly uneven, dependent on individual faculty members' discretion. A university-wide accommodation framework—with standardized procedures, clear eligibility criteria, and monitoring mechanisms—is crucial to ensuring consistency, transparency, and accountability (Brewer et al., 2023). Regular audits and feedback loops involving SWDs themselves can help universities continuously improve their support systems (Brewer et al., 2023).

Taken together, these seven areas of reform align with emerging global scholarship advocating for whole-institution approaches to inclusion, where accessibility is not confined to disability services but becomes a guiding principle across all units of the university (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Strnadova et al., 2015). Such approaches emphasize embedding Universal Design for Learning, accessible technology, faculty development, and inclusive infrastructure into a unified strategy that addresses structural inequities systemically rather than sporadically. In the Lebanese context—where institutional readiness remains uneven and inclusive education is still emerging—adopting a whole-campus approach could ensure that inclusion is not dependent on the goodwill of individuals but built into the core structures of the institution. By grounding reform in this comprehensive model, Lebanese HEIs can transition from reactive accommodations to proactive transformation, truly fulfilling their commitments under the CRPD and national inclusive education policies.

Strengths and limitations

A key strength of the study lies in its in-depth examination of individual experiences, which revealed both the resilience of SWDs and the institutional shortcomings that shape their journeys. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced and areas for improvement in higher education.

Despite extensive recruitment efforts, participation in the study remained limited—likely due to the relatively small number of SWDs at the institution and a general hesitancy to engage in research. Nonetheless, the study prioritized depth over breadth, focusing on detailed individual narratives rather than broad representation. A larger sample may not have introduced fundamentally new insights but would likely have reinforced the patterns and themes already identified. By capturing the complexity of participants' experiences, the study offers rich, transferable knowledge that can inform more inclusive practices in higher education.

At the same time, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was drawn from a single institution and a limited range of disciplines, meaning that the experiences of students from other academic areas may not be fully represented. In addition, while the study included individuals with various types of disabilities, it did not

encompass the full spectrum thereby narrowing the scope of its findings. Notably, students with intellectual disabilities were not included in this study. This exclusion narrows the scope of the findings, as their experiences with academic inclusion, peer interaction, and support systems may differ substantially from those of other students with disabilities. Future research should specifically explore the perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive practices in higher education.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the multifaceted experiences of SWDs in Lebanese HEI, emphasizing the importance of understanding their challenges, promoting awareness, and fostering an inclusive and supportive university environment. By employing a qualitative approach, the study sheds light on the perspectives and lived experiences of SWDs, providing valuable insights into the barriers they face, and the strategies needed to overcome them. Findings from this study pave the way for practical policy recommendations and institutional reforms. Achieving meaningful inclusion requires structural, cultural, and procedural changes. Faculty, staff, and peers all play critical roles in shaping inclusive learning spaces. Addressing barriers related to accessibility, curriculum flexibility, and administrative processes is essential for enabling equitable academic participation.

Future studies could expand this work by incorporating the perspectives of students without disabilities, faculty members, and administrative staff to gain a more holistic understanding of institutional culture and its impact on inclusion (Moriña, 2017; Mosia and Phasha, 2017). Broader stakeholder engagement would support the development of comprehensive strategies for fostering equity and accessibility in Lebanese HEIs.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Saint Joseph University Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

KJ: Software, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Investigation, Project

administration, Conceptualization, Visualization. MK: Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization. JS: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Validation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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