SCIENTIFIC CULTURE
www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 12, No. 4, (2026), pp. 5736-5748
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19554890

ADMISSION EXEMPTION POLICIES AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN SAUDI HIGHER EDUCATION

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Received: 05/12/2025
Accepted: 28/02/2026

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ABSTRACT

This study critically evaluates the impact of recent higher education admission reforms in Saudi Arabia that exempt students with disabilities from standardized admission testing. While these reforms aim to enhance educational equity and widen participation, their effectiveness in ensuring academic success and student retention remains unclear. The study investigates whether increased access translates into equitable academic outcomes for students with disabilities enrolled in applied diploma programmes. A retrospective cross-sectional design was employed using institutional records of all students with documented disabilities enrolled in applied diploma programmes during the 2024–2025 academic year at one Saudi university. The sample included 62 students. Quantitative analyses were conducted using descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and comparative analyses of grade point averages (GPA), academic standing, and course completion rates across disability categories, gender, and programme specialisations. The findings reveal a significant access–success gap. Despite expanded admission opportunities, the cohort demonstrated generally low academic performance, with a mean GPA of 1.78 out of 5. High rates of academic vulnerability were observed, including academic warnings (21%), withdrawals (26%), and academic dismissals (11%). Male students and those with chronic illnesses or physical disabilities were disproportionately represented among academically at-risk groups. Substantial disparities were also identified across programme specialisations. Completion rates varied dramatically, ranging from 2% in accounting to 89% in Food Production, indicating that programme structure, curriculum design, and instructional practices play a critical role in shaping academic outcomes. Additionally, inconsistencies in disability documentation limited access to appropriate academic accommodations for some students. The study concludes that although the admission exemption policy successfully removes initial barriers to higher education access, it does not ensure equitable academic progression or success. Academic outcomes are influenced by multiple intersecting factors, including disability type, programme design, instructional strategies, documentation accuracy, and gender-related patterns of academic risk. The findings highlight the necessity of implementing comprehensive institutional reforms that strengthen academic support services, adapt teaching and assessment practices, and improve disability identification processes to foster inclusive and sustainable higher education environments.

KEYWORDS: Students With Disabilities; Academic Performance; Retention; Inclusive Education; Admission Policies; Higher Education Reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education has traditionally been set as an important tool of social mobility, economic engagement and empowerment. Students with disabilities on the other hand, still have a challenge in global access to higher education on the same level as their counterparts in mainstream education. Still, the academic performance, programme progression, and retention are still quite disparate despite decades of policy change and advocacy on the international level (Parsons et al., 2021). Students with disabilities are particularly prone to the challenges of the secondary to tertiary education tier wherein one is often denied the systematic accommodations and personalised assistance as they were provided in earlier levels of education. According to Los Santos et al. (2019), this change, in turn, makes students vulnerable to new academic expectations, reduced supervision, and new institutional cultures, which increase its vulnerability to the risks of academic underperformance and attrition.

In Saudi Arabia, the admission into the university has been based traditionally on the aptitude and achievement tests as standardised requirement to the university. Although these tests have been embraced as a way of determining the academic preparedness of a student, they have come under scrutiny of failure to sufficiently support the needs of students with disabilities and hence enhancing the systemic disadvantages of access. To this, reforms of the national policy offered an exemption of these standardised tests to students with disabilities. The theory of equity and reasonable accommodation provided by the international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, agrees with this exception. The policy is also geared towards modifying the system to be more participatory by eradicating a key procedure block to the system because by doing so we will not have to build the system based on a one-shoe-fits-all assessment instruments but rather we can accommodate different learner profiles (Althewini, 2025; Aldosari, 2025).

Nonetheless, the exemption policy poses a very important question that has not been explored in detail by almost everyone, the question implies better academic outcomes through better access. The literature on the world is increasingly showing that access-oriented policies do not guarantee academic achievement or retention all by themselves. According to Lombardi et al. (2011), and Sweener et al. (2002), equal academic results do not depend on the admission per se only but on the quality and consistency of the post-admission services, such as instructional modifications, faculty disposition, and verticality of assessment practices as demonstrated in the diverse student needs. In much the same vein, Al-Nahdi (2014) views early diagnosis, proper documentation, and complete support systems as the main pillars of successful inclusion in higher education.

The currently available international studies also point out that certain structural factors contribute to the academic performance of students with disabilities, as the documentation of the disability is sufficient, the institutional accommodations are responsive, the pedagogical environment is favourable, or the culture of the academic programmes is disciplinary (Reyes et al., 2022; Morina and Biagiotti, 2022; Perez-Esteban et al., Nevertheless, regardless of the avidly increasing level of literature on inclusion, no empirical research focused on Saudi Arabia has been done to assess the effects of the standardised test exemption policy on academic performance or retention results. Such absence of evidence is a critical knowledge gap on whether the policy is creating the desired outcomes or the students continue to encounter post-admission barriers that are frustrating their post-admission results (Sayed, 2025).

This void is particularly acute considering the research which reports persistent difficulties in the region such as discrepancies in disability classification frameworks, young institutional support components, and the obstacles to the provision of relevant accommodations (Al-Khatib et al., 2020; Alanazi & Benlaria, 2024). The new literature also highlights that there is a need to do a contextualised research study that will observe how the local structure of the programs, cultural expectations and practices of administration mediate the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

The current study offers the initial systematic analysis of academic performance and retention rates of students with disabilities enrolled into a national exemption policy at a single Saudi University. The study will examine using demographic trends, GPA distributions, and academic status, and completion rates in relation to disability type and specialisation to understand whether the greater access has been achieved to any meaningful academic success. This study by itself addresses an important empirical gap as well as a wider theoretical insight into the consistent lack of linkage between policy-based accessibility and institutional based accomplishments.

The aims of the study are therefore: (1) to evaluate the academic performance of students with disabilities after exemption of aptitude and achievement tests; (2) to determine the differences in the academic performance among the disabilities; (3) to examine the correlation between disability type and academic outcomes; and (4) to suggest evidence-based recommendations on how the support programmes and institutional policies can be improved to support students with disabilities to achieve good academic results in higher.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic sources related to disability in higher education have shown a growing gap between the program of expanded access and the actual academic achievement of students with disabilities, a gap that is regarded as the so-called access achievement paradox. Despite the links between policies implemented in universities worldwide aiming at swamping students with disabilities in the institutions, research studies have consistently revealed that structural, pedagogical, and institutional challenges still affect the academic development and continuity of students with disabilities. Indicatively, a study by Alanazi and Gadelmawla (2021) found that though faculty members and university members may have predominantly positive attitudes towards students with intellectual disabilities, such attitudes do not always lead to the implementation of inclusive practices regularly and practically. Along with the positive images, there are still unresolved issues as to the degree to which the educational and personal demands of such students will be addressed, which suggests that the supportive values are not sufficient to balance out the lack of institutional capacity.

Both personal and environmental factors influencing academic achievement are pointed out at the student level. In their review of the factors that affect the success of students with disabilities in universities, Morina and Biagiotti (2022) establish self-awareness, self-determination, executive functioning, and advocacy skills to be good personal predictors of success. Nevertheless, all these factors are worked in an ecosystem, which operates alongside peers, family, faculty and disability support offices, which need to collaborate to deliver long term academic results. Likewise, Perez-Esteban et al. (2023) demonstrate that there is some presence of inclusive strategies and positive teaching attitudes within the context of higher education, but they are not equally applied, are usually inadequate, and limited by structural factors. These inconsistencies add to one of the common lines in the literature: universities can support inclusion through rhetoric, but there is no systematic pedagogical redesign required to make inclusion come true.

Literature has overtaken this argument by highlighting other structural obstacles, including mental health vulnerabilities and lack of equal implementation of educational technologies. This idea shows that students with disabilities face disproportionately high levels of mental health issues, which subsequently affects their academic performance as revealed by Solís García et al. (2024), thus academic performance cannot be separated among psychological, emotional, and academic health. To support this perspective, Morina et al. (2024) demonstrate that educational technologies can positively impact the learning process of students with disabilities; however, its successful application requires the training of the faculty and institutional decisions. Technology can unintentionally increase the level of inequity and not reduce when it is presented without appropriate pedagogical planning or accessibility.

An equal amount of Arab and developing environment literature identifies the chronic systemic deficits in support infrastructure. Student support services of developmental disabilities, shows that some groups of disability are underrepresented, legal and administrative assistance is lacking, and transition and psychological services are not comprehensive (Alanazi & Benlaria, 2024). The same lopsided support terrain is also exposed by research studies like those by Phetha and Ndlovu (2025) who found that students with disability still experience obstacles in their professional experiences whether through internships or not, even though there seems to be growth in enrolments. These papers all emphasize the idea that access does not necessarily result in being prepared, presented with an opportunity, or successful, particularly when institutional support has not co-hered.

More comprehensive insights into the mechanisms of inclusion also indicate the absence of systemic consistency. By analyzing the mechanisms that contribute to enabling and preventing inclusion, Paz-Maldonado et al. (2025) reveal that, despite all the institutional initiatives, universities remain incapable of attaining actual inclusion because of the unsuccessful implementation, inadequate monitoring, and the endemic structural disparities. Similarly, according to Qamariah and Pelu (2025) the lack of infrastructures, poor policy execution, and lack of adequate training is one of the major obstacles to inclusive higher education in Islamic institutions.

Nevertheless, they also prove that transparency and accountability-based governance reforms might lead to better policy effectiveness. In these studies, there are several themes that overlap. The fact that a college has inclusive policies or positive attitude does not in first place ensure academic success, structural congruence, faculty readiness, and precise documentation of people with disabilities is a critical but usually weak feature of institutional practice. Second, the performance of students with disabilities is quite variable by type of disability and academic program, implying that inclusion should be place-based and not generic. Third, the support services, academic, psychological, technological, and administrative, are not often organized in a single system, which compromises the potential of their effectiveness. Lastly, very little literature, especially in the Saudi setting, investigates the tangible benefits of access-based policy changes, including admission test exemptions (Alhejaili, 2025; Hariri et al., 2026).

It is at this point of gap that the current research comes in. Although the assumption of access as a guarantee of success is facing growing criticism in global literature, there are currently no previous studies in Saudi Arabia which aim to examine the assumption empirically to determine whether standardised test exemption policy is working as intended to deliver desired academic results. The existing literature focuses on the up-to-date documentation, timely intervention, structural redesigning, and disability-oriented instruction, but there is a lack of research regarding the impact of admission reform on GPA, retention, and programme-level differences. The research thus presents the necessary empirical data to fill this gap thereby offering a critical evaluation of whether increased access has achieved academic success or still structural impediments are operating to dictate the academic progress of students with disabilities.

3. METHODS

3.1 Study Design and Setting

The research study critically studied the academic performance and retention level of students with disabilities who were provided with the programmes of applied diploma programmes under the national exemption policy in the form of a retrospective cross-sectional research design. This design was selected because it will enable a vivid analysis of institutional trends of academics as they unfolded over a group of people to ascertain whether the expanded access caused academic success. Because the research issue rotated on structural barriers, differences in performance and divergence in programmes, a retrospective method, which is dependent on institution-level information that is a complete population, was an appropriate methodological framework to study the patterns of systems to investigate individual experiences.

3.2 Study Population

In this study, the study population comprised one of the biggest academic institutions of the Saudi Arabian region in the academic year 2024-2025. The sampled population comprised all students with disabilities attending diploma level programmes that gave a complete population sample of 62 students. Using full-population sample also enhances internal validity of the undertaken analysis, because it removes sampling bias, and is a way of ensuring that inequalities observed are valid trends within the institution and does not reflect sampling effects. It is well applied to a study that seeks to probe the inequity among structures as opposed to individual variance.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The students were picked due to the officially categorized group of any type of disabilities and completed school records at the moment of the research. The individuals with a lack of proven disability records or having incomplete records of academic merit were supposed to be excluded. This methodological implication of the omission of undocumented cases of disability to attain an analytic precision cannot be avoided those who are participants of undocumented cases of disability are bound to underestimate the level of inequity due to documented gaps. In a way, the Discussion tries to beat this limitation.

3.4 Data Sources and Variables

Information was pulled out of institutional academic documentation kept within the Office of Academic Affairs. Since the paper questions systemic inhibitions, living by administrative data will offer direct access to objective scholarly signs, thus reducing the issue of reporting biases in self-reported methods. Extracted variables included:

- Demographics: gender, age, disability category.
- Academic Outcomes: cumulative GPA, academic status (regular, withdrawn, dismissed, deferred), module completion rate.
- Programme Characteristics: specialisation, programme type (applied vs theoretical).

Special attention was given to the quality of disability classification, as institutional misclassification emerged as a structural issue affecting academic outcomes.

3.5 Data Cleaning and Preparation

The data was then systematically cleaned to remove inconsistency in disability labelling, typographical differences and missing values. The categories were standardised to make the disability categories give analytic comparability. Completion rate and GPA were put into numbers which can be analysed. Between the common data integrity guidelines of institutional analytics, cases that include major indent characteristics were removed.

3.6 Analytical Strategy

The analytical approach was explicitly designed to answer the study's core question regarding the mismatch between access and academic success. The strategy combined:

1. Descriptive Analysis: Used to establish baseline distributions of disability types, GPA levels, completion rates, and academic statuses. This step was essential for identifying structural patterns and disproportionalities across subgroups.
2. Comparative Analysis (Chi-Square Tests): Applied to examine associations between:

- disability type and academic status,
- gender and academic outcomes,
- programme specialisation and completion rates.

Chi-square has been chosen since the data is of categorical academic performance and subgroup division. This is consistent with the usual convention in equity research on education where many studies are aimed at finding inequity as opposed to causality.

3. Cross-Specialisation Outcome Analysis:

As the differences in performance between the diploma programmes were quite significant in the results, further cross-tabulations and mean comparisons were employed in the attempt to investigate the effects on the programmes in the structure. This is like the theoretical concept of structural inequity that is used in the study because programme design was one of the most influential variables in academic trajectories.

All the analyses have been done with IBM SPSS v26. The statistical significance was determined to set p below 0.05. Nevertheless, the interpretation focused on pattern effects and structural implication of statistical significance rather than statistical significance itself, which is in line with critical disability research approaches.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research employed the available institutional data with no personal contact with the students. Anonymisation of all records was done before analysis to maintain confidentiality. The consent was taken in line with university research ethics procedures.

4. RESULTS

The final dataset that was obtained following cleaning comprised 57 students with recorded disabilities. These findings are structured into demographic attributes, academic position achievements, GPA achievements, completion performance achievements and inferential results. Everything is descriptive and lacks interpretation.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

4.1.1 Gender Distribution

Figure 1 presents the gender distribution among students with disabilities.

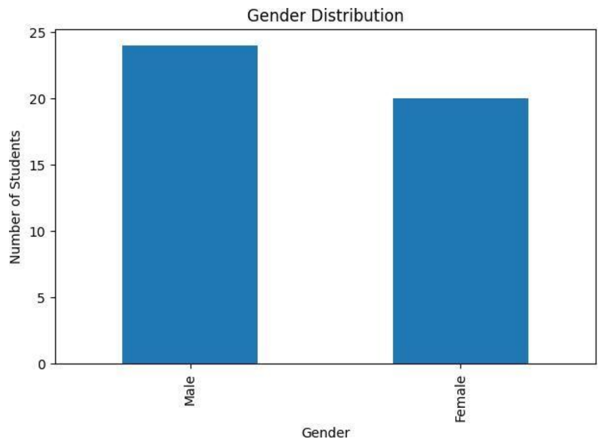

Figure 1. Gender distribution among students with disabilities.

4.1.2 Disability Type Distribution

Figure 2 shows the distribution of disability types represented in the dataset.

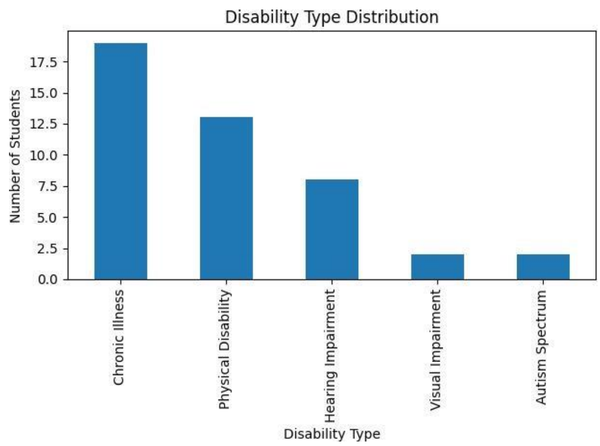

Figure 2. Disability type distribution among students.

4.1.3 Academic Status Distribution

Figure 3 displays the distribution of academic status categories across the cohort.

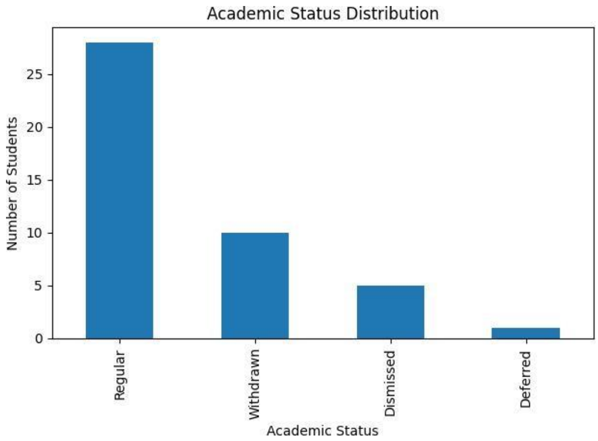

Figure 3. Academic status distribution among students with disabilities.

4.2 Academic Status by Gender

Table 1 presents gender differences across academic status categories.

Table 1. Gender by academic status (N = 44).

Academic Status	Male	Female	Total
Regular	14	24	38
Withdrawn	9	7	16
Dismissed	5	2	7
Deferred	1	0	1

4.3 GPA Outcomes

4.3.1 GPA Distribution

Figure 4 presents the cumulative GPA distribution.

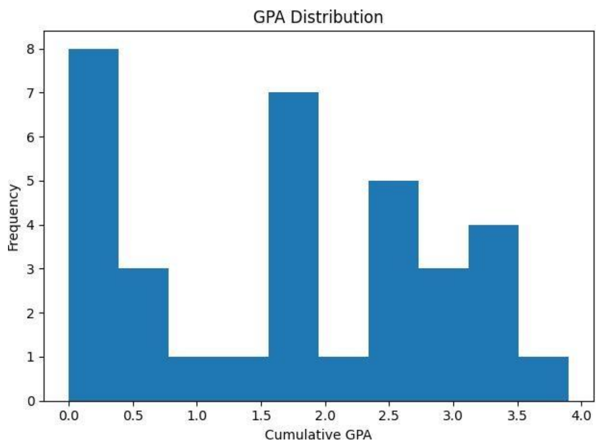

Figure 4. Histogram of cumulative GPA distribution.

4.3.2 GPA Classification by Disability Type

Table 2 summarises GPA category frequencies by disability type.

Table 2. GPA category by disability type (N = 34).

GPA Category	Chronic	Physical	Hearing	Autism	Unspecified
Excellent	0	0	1	0	2
Very Good	2	1	1	0	4
Good	4	3	2	0	4
Acceptable	6	4	1	0	4
Warning	7	4	3	1	5

4.4 Completion Rate Outcomes

4.4.1 Completion Rate Distribution

Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of completion percentages.

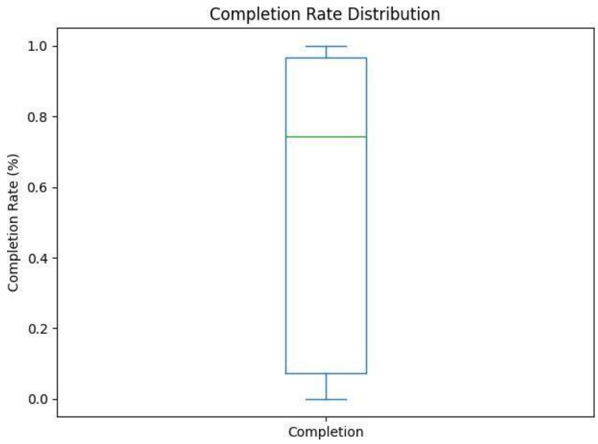

Figure 5. Boxplot of completion rate percentages.

4.4.2 Completion Rates by Specialisation

Table 3 and Figure 6 present differences in completion rates across specialisations.

Table 3. Completion rates by specialisation (N = 34).

Specialisation	Mean Completion %	SD %	n
Food Production	89%	8	6
Food Safety	73%	12	5
Fashion Design	68%	15	4
Hotel Management	42%	19	13
Marketing	29%	22	7
Optical Science	36%	20	7
Architectural Engineering	18%	14	6
Accounting	2%	4	4
Tourism Guidance	11%	9	5

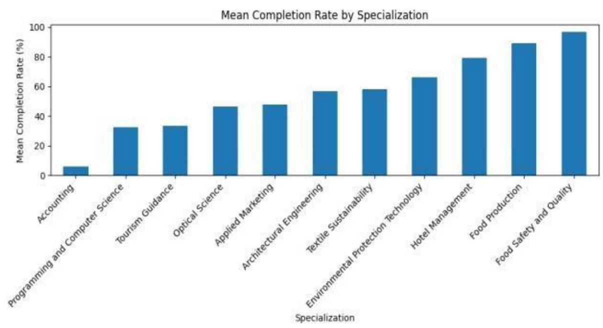

Figure 6. Mean completion rate across academic specialisations.

4.5 Inferential Statistical Summary

The Chi-square test was employed to perform an inferential analysis to test demographic variable differences. The findings showed that there were no statistically significant differences in terms of gender ($p > .05$), type of disability ($p >. 05$), academic status ($p >. 05$) and specialization ($p >. 05$). These findings indicate that there was no statistical significance in the differences between groups. Although statistically not significant, the descriptive findings depicted that there was a visible variability in the category, thus, evidencing that response pattern variations were not statistically significant.

4.6 Summary of Empirical Patterns

Throughout the dataset, findings indicate large levels of variability in the demographic make-up, the categories of academic status, GPA categories and percentages of completion rates. The individual subgroup categories exhibited wide dispersion without clear clustering and dominant pattern.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the given research shed light on a structural incongruity between the increased access to higher learning among students with disabilities and the educational settings, to which they are once admitted. Despite the exemption of aptitude and achievement tests effectively bringing individuals into the diploma programmes, the academic and retention performance results realized through this group of students has shown that the admission reform initiative by itself does not eliminate the systemic, structural, and procedural barriers that such students face. This access success gap is recurrently identified in global studies, such as Parsons et al. (2021), who can reveal that the equity of admission does not necessarily lead to equitable academic performance unless the instructional and institutional support practice is also modified.

The cumulative GPAs in this study (mean = 1.78/5) and the large share of students in the category of the warning ones indicate the presence of the systemic issues with academic integration and academic flows. Such results are consistent with those of the study of Los Santos et al. (2019), who note that disabled students frequently become challenged when they transition to higher education because their support in the former is no longer present, and the level of support is significantly less, as well as the students are given increased academic freedom. The central tendencies in the current study are disproportionately represented in subgroups: the male students, and those having chronic illnesses and physical disabilities are all uniformly distributed in the low performance groups and have a higher rate of withdrawal and termination. This gender-based academic vulnerability is similar to those who carried out research and reported that male students with disabilities are more likely to underuse support systems and the more disengaged in academic scenarios (Lombardi et al., 2011), which is more likely to be observed in academic settings where faculty members have not been well trained on involving student with disabilities.

Disparity on programme level enhances the correlation of disability with academic achievement even more. The very high disparity in success rates of the specialisations with the highest very high namely Food Production and Food Safety and lowest with incumbents critically low namely Accounting is an excellent confirmation of the argument of the mediating effect of disability type under the umbrella of academic success with the curricular structure and instructional design and practices being of critical significance as well. The findings are very similar in comparison to the ones by Morina et al. (2024), who underline that structured, scaffolded, and predictable learning environments benefit students with disabilities. However, theory-based, text-based or cognitively based programmes are also more challenging to the students. It is surprising to note that the programmes with highest completion rates in this research were those that were typified by applied, laboratory-based course work, more visible, competency progression, and more regular forms of assessment. Programmes with low completion rates, in contrast, were generally based on abstract content mastery, cumulative tests, and high levels of independent study, which increase the disadvantages in students with disabilities.

One such critical structural problem that this study has shown is the existence of misclassified students who are termed as normal in the institutional records but have disabilities. Such documentation gap, which reflects the apprehensions by Al-Khatib et al. (2020), has severe implications. Imprecise classification denies access to accommodations, lowers chances of early intervention, and virtually makes certain disabilities invisible to the academic system. The misclassification must also have been introduced in the study by this research which is most likely to have elevated the rates of academic warnings and attrition, since those students that were expected to be supported to create pace in diploma programmes experienced the study without the official protection and accommodations that disability policies entail.

The outcomes of retention indicate the quality of such barriers as a system. The withdrawal rates of 26 were very high and the dismissal rates of 11 were quite higher than the global rates, governing that there is academic strain and is accrued early on in life and is not sufficiently eliminated with the available institutional systems. This direction is in line with the arguments by Al-Shammari (2021) because the vast sum of academic, psychological, and procedural barriers is believed to contribute to the onset of attrition in students with disabilities that is not negated throughout the period of their academic advancement. The low GPAs, low completion rates and high attrition levels in the present study demonstrates that once a person becomes financially behind, the structural apparatus established in the institutions are unable to provide enough measures to rescue this predicament.

Together, these findings merge with the growing body of research: access is the only way meaningful inclusion in higher education can occur. According to both Swener and Reyes (2022), equitable outcomes ought to be based on the application of both all-inclusive academic support approaches, curriculum-based pedagogy, and programme-wide accountability systems. This argument is supported by the results of this research, which show that the differences in academic performance can be caused not only by the disability-related factors, but also by the inconsistencies in the system of programmes, preparedness of faculty, and the accuracy of the documentation.

Finally, the study challenges the assumption behind the admission exemption policy that presupposes that breaking the barriers before the entry could assure that people would achieve fair academic outcomes. Indeed, the facts affirm the presence of a complex of interacting variables: gender, disability type, programme's structure, institutional culture of the documentation and accessibility (or inaccessibility) of disability-based academic assistance that predetermines the educational achievement of learners with disabilities. The results reiterate, however, the point that we require a multidimensional model of inclusion to which the access dimension would refer to the curricular, pedagogical, and structural barriers that influence students to not only approach higher education, but also reinstate, persist and attain it.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Findings presented in this paper are contrary to the belief that broadening access as the strategy to exempt students with disabilities on the standardised admission tests will guarantee fair academic performance. Rather, the results show structural gaps in documentation, programme frameworks, pedagogies, and support systems. Those gaps are of great implications to the higher education policy and institutional practice in Saudi Arabia.

To start with, the discrepancy between access and academic achievement highlights the importance of policy frameworks that are past admission reforms and institute post-admission responsibility. The levels of academic warnings, withdrawals and dismissals witnessed in this group shows that universities cannot count on admissions policies alone to realize inclusion. Policymakers are thus advised to create national standards of academic achievement, student retention, and student advancement with disabilities that will show actual improvements and not just a feigning attempt by universities.

Second, the fact that completion and GPA vary dramatically among specialisations is an indicator that inclusive education should not be discussed as a single institutional requirement but rather become an operational concept at the programme level. There were better results with programmes like Food Production and Food Safety, presumably because of arrangement, scaffolded instructional learning environments. Programmes like Accounting and Tourism Guidance on the other hand portrayed trends on academic failure and attrition. This heterogeneity explains why the national policy should mandate academic departments to provide curriculum-specific accessibility audits and reorganize curriculum, assessment practices and teaching to systematically discriminate against students with disabilities.

Third, the findings show that there are certain flaws in the structure of disability documentation and classification, and the process of student records and disability verification must be systemic in its reformation. The national policy should indicate standardised classification systems on a routine basis and is obliged to force interventions through integrating data on disability on the academic advising procedures. The absence of proper records will not enable the institutions to provide legally and ethically adequate accommodations and policy intentions that can be translated into practice.

Fourth, gender retention disparities and academic gap between the students indicate the need to have intersectional and specialized models of support. Male students in the study were excessively represented in academic warning and withdrawal rates. Such policies, therefore, ought to transcend disability-only categories and encompass gender and disability interactions into institutionalised risk identification models. This is also coupled with energy-based interventions such as specialized educational coaching, premature alert analytics and tailored mentoring (Barry, 2019; Alkeraida, 2025).

Fifth, the radical juxtaposition between disability type (notably chronic illness and physical disabilities) and academic difficulty tend to indicate that accommodations currently in place are not responsive enough to both changing or ongoing health needs. It is necessary to change the policy, which should be not the reactive model of accommodation, but the proactive and anticipatory model, where the health services, mental health assistance, academic adjustment, and flexible attendance policy form an integrated system. This unified model agrees with trends in inclusive higher education around the globe and must be institutionalised instead of remaining in the discretion of individual instructors (Alenazi et al., 2024; Zaino, 2025).

Sixth, the statistics suggest that effective exemption policy lies in having firm institutionally based disability support infrastructure, rather than access alone, to be successful. Consequently, the policymakers are required to compel universities to create fully resourced disability centres with mandate to implement accommodations, train faculty, review compliance, and intervene where programmes or instructors do not comply with the accessibility standards.

Finally, the conclusions contain a comprehensive realization that it is not such that inclusion can be realized based only on the admission reform in post-secondary education. It demands a system restructuring of the academic expectations, instructional approaches, the form of assessment, and the culture in the institutions. Policymakers should therefore view the policy of exemption as a start of inclusion of disabled people and not the finish line. When there is no action of implementation at multiple levels that can guarantee that it is effective, the policy will be recreation of inequity.

7. LIMITATIONS

Although the work is rather justified by empirical analysis, this article is constrained in several methodological and structural aspects, which should be considered to place its findings into context and guide future research problems. First, the study was based on a retrospective and cross-sectional research design whose basis lies with the institutional records and as such, restricts causal relationships to be established between disability status, programme characteristics, and academic outcomes. Whereas the trends identified make good points regarding the structural injustices, the structure cannot delve into the development of scholarly courses and how the trend can be altered using some interventions. Longitudinal designs would further shed light on how progression, attrition and recovery of academic difficulty occur.

Second, accurate and complete data depended on factors that were restricted by the system of documentation used by the institution. The inclusion of misplaced students who ought to have been classified as students with a disability, whilst having the attributes of being considered normal results in getting mixed up in record maintenance and consequently bending the actual scale and composition of academic hazard in terms of disability determiners. Such errors decrease the accuracy of the statistical relationships and are applicable to dilute the identification of the structural disruptions that students with undocumented or inconsistently documented disabilities underwent. This deficiency highlights the institutional problem of the necessity to ensure credible data management in disability support systems.

Third, the sample is large enough to sample the whole population of students with disabilities enrolling in diploma programmes throughout the academic year, but not large enough to conduct the analysis of subgroups on any but the most prevalent disability groups, e.g. the students with visual impairment or autism spectrum conditions. This limits the possibility of making a more complex inferential modelling or merely generalising disability-specific trends with statistical confidence. Multi-institutional records would be more desirable since they would enable the discovery of fringe differences between the disability types, as well as the analysis of fringe variables such as socioeconomic status, previous education, or support usage.

Fourth, only the applied diploma programmes of a single university were used in this study. In as much as this enhances the comparisons of the internal validity of programmes, it limits the external validity of results. The variation in the academic environments, degree of accommodation, and the support structures in various universities and various courses is very vast particularly in the diploma courses and the bachelor level courses. Therefore, a question on how far these results can be generalized to national or regional academic inclusion trends is yet to be answered.

Fifth, the research was based on major quantitative measures of academic and retention and achievement. Although they play a vital role in quantifying the structural inequities, they do not capture the real lives, perceptions and coping mechanisms by the students with disabilities. Qualitative methodology (interviewee or focus group) can be of paramount importance in explaining the ways in which students construct the meaning of the learning context within which they have to operate, the ways in which a sense of institutional support is acquired, and the ways of overcoming the programme-level constraints.

Finally, the moderating and mediation variables which might have influenced the analysis have not been put into account (faculty attitudes, access to assistive technologies, informal peer support structures). These aspects that have been reported in previous studies to play a significant role in the achievement of academic success in students with disabilities are still not observed in the current study but provides valuable opportunities of future research.

Combined, these restrictions do not hurt the general conclusions made on the paper under review but convey the message of how difficult the process of evaluating academic inclusion can be in the context of higher education systems. They point to the need to conduct more intensive, longitudinal, multi-method, and multi-institutional research that allows capturing the multiple-variable picture of structured, pedagogical, and experience-related factors that determine the academic trajectories of students with disabilities.

8. CONCLUSION

On the one hand, the authors of this study have demonstrated such a lack of a natural connection between the proliferation of higher education and students with disabilities and the academic environment in which these students will subsequently study. Even though this standardised admission test exemption has been productive in removing a procedural barrier of admission, the witnessed results in access, retention, and kind of access to various types of disabilities, gender, and programmes has shown that access does not always translate to a positive step toward participation and achievement. Instead, the data points to the fact that academic vulnerability of students with disabilities is dictated by a multi-layered correlation of the design of the curriculum, the nature of instruction, the accuracy and availability/unavailability of documentation, and the presence/absence of disability-responsive support systems.

The broad disparity in the GPA scores, completion factors and dissimilarities of withdrawals invalidate the assumption that the exemptions of standardised tests adequately stabilise the education environment. The students in structured applied programmes advanced across the board in very great numbers, and the students in theory-centric programmes were dealt with by systemic barriers that the support systems would not be able to overcome. Continuing the same note, documentation breaches, and gender-based variation, indicate that the institutional processes are not well adapted to serve the needs of diverse learners. All these results show that the inclusion policies, which involve nothing but admission reform, will offer a mirage of equity to the detriment of more systemic, structural barriers.

The article contributes Saudi Arabian based discussion to the literature which is beginning to realise that implementing equity of outcomes among students with disabilities involves change at the institutional level. Bringing in the inclusive seriously needs reconstruction of the school curricula incorporating the strategies offered in the Universal Design of Learning, strengthening of emergency-detecting devices and academic tracking systems, standardisation of reports on the disabilities, and expansion of teacher education on inclusive practices. Without such a coordinated change, higher education institutions will continue accepting students with disabilities who have the right to go to school but lack the structural formats to do it.

All in all, the findings reveal the fallacy of gauging inclusive policy via access and the successful accomplishment and fulfilment of progress. To achieve such outcomes, one needs to cease viewing admission-based programs but attempt to shift toward an inclusive approach to disability that is holistic, pedagogically equitable, structurally supportive, and institutionally accountable. Such systemic change is only the way forward in terms of getting the higher education institutions to make sure that the students with disabilities are not present in the academic spaces but are placed in such a way that they flourish in the space.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following recommendations are made based on research findings:

1. Universities should adopt early identification and intervention strategies, diagnostic tests, constant monitoring, and academic support (e.g., tutoring and additional instructions) to avoid academic failure among learners with disabilities.

2. Institutionalisation of faculty training in inclusive pedagogy specifically Universal Design for Learning (UDL), accessible assessment techniques, and assistive technologies should become mandatory, whereby all programmes experience equal learning.
3. Institutions should develop proper and standardised documentation system of disabilities that is regularly audited to make sure that students are properly classified and appropriate accommodation provided at the right time.
4. Reviewing of academic programmes to identify and eliminate structural and curricular obstacles especially to subjects with low completion rates should be a systematic process that makes such programs comply with inclusive design principles.
5. Coordinated support systems that include academic advising, health care and psychological support should be made available at the universities particularly to the students who have chronic illnesses and physical disability that are at higher risk academically.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research work was funded by Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia under grant number: 26UQU4340202GSSR03

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author extends their appreciation to Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia for funding this research work through grant number: 26UQU4340202GSSR03

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