

A Source of Inspiration

Hazem M Shehada and Bahaalddin M Serhan describe the DSIC for Deaf Students at the Islamic University of Gaza

Abstract

The Islamic University of Gaza has adopted the concept of inclusive education ie mainstreaming concepts in education, and has established a specialist Center called the 'Disability Services and Inclusion Center' (DSIC). The Center developed policy and guidance to ensure accessibility.

The Islamic University is leading the way in facilitating access to a university education according to the criteria established by the international convention for persons with disabilities.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Inclusive Education is directly relevant to the Palestinian Disability Law and the Ministry of Education's 'Education Sector Strategic Plan', which concerns the rights of Palestinians with disabilities to education, Article 10, Item 3: In the Education Sector "... guarantee[s] the right of the disabled to attain equal opportunities to enroll in the various educational and training facilities and in universities in accordance with the curricula determined in these establishments." The law also stipulates providing "... appropriate educational and training curricula and approaches and other suitable facilities" and also ensures providing "... various types and levels of education to the disabled individuals according to their needs." Most importantly and most relevant to this master's program is the subsection "preparing qualified educators to train the disabled according to the type of disability"¹.

DSIC depends on information and communication technology because it is the backbone of a knowledge-based economy where the fittest survive, whether they have a disability or not. The deaf can now compete on an equal footing with hearing persons on the basis of knowledge and technological competence. Studies have shown that assistive technologies help people with disabilities to enjoy a more satisfactory life².

1.2 Motivations and aims

This paper presents deaf education at the Islamic University of Gaza as a case study. It shows the capabilities, resources, and achievements and, at the same time identifies barriers and ways to overcome them in order to facilitate better inclusion of the deaf. It also analyzes the current situation and makes recommendations.

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 talks about the Islamic University of Gaza and its DSIC; section 3 outlines DSIC and CDI (Community Development Institute) achievements; section 4 talks about the problems and challenges facing deaf education; section 5 outlines future plans; section 6 concludes the paper.

2 DSIC at the Islamic University of Gaza

2.1 Islamic University of Gaza (IUG)

The Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) is the leading institution for higher education in the Gaza Strip. IUG has over 19,000 students and over 900 teaching instructors. Over the last five years, IUG has started to offer online courses through Moodle

and to supplement courses with online materials.

2.2 Disability Services and Inclusion Center (DSIC)

Disability Services and Inclusion Center at the Islamic University initially focused on the inclusion of persons with visual disabilities in university education, and then expanded to include people with physical disabilities, and finally to include persons with hearing disabilities (deaf) in university education. Initially enrolled on professional diploma programs at Community Development Institute (CDI), students will be included in undergraduate programs later. In DSIC and CDI we work together with specific objective strategies which are:

- Enhancing academic skills and improving the level of knowledge of students with disabilities.
- Personal development for students with disabilities and achieving independence.
- Strengthening the center's role in serving people with disabilities in society.
- Integration of graduates with disabilities into society.
- Increasing and expanding educational opportunities for deaf students.

2.3 DSIC resources

The following devices are available at DSIC: alternative keyboard, Braille embosser, alternative mouse, screen reader, speech synthesizer, speech recognition software, FM systems for deaf students, and TTS system (a text-to-speech technology that is used in accessibility applications for people with visual impairments). The center is building its own library by reproducing reference books and publishing textbooks. The center distributes the textbooks to students and continues to build its own library. The center also keeps local newspapers and magazines available to its students through the center website. It now provides academic support in the form of curriculum materials in Braille or large print, and adapting curriculum materials with sign language.

3 DSIC and CDI achievements

In 2014 114 deaf students enrolled to study professional diploma programs at CDI. The first course to be offered was Creative Technology and the next Computer and Smart Device Maintenance. Twenty-five textbooks have been adapted with sign language for deaf students. There is free tuition and free transportation for 114 deaf students. This program is ongoing and has received a group of deaf students who have finished secondary school every year over the past five years.

In addition, 100 university staff in the various departments and colleges of IUG were trained to use sign language to communicate with deaf students through five training courses in sign language. The following table shows the graduation of students with hearing impairments during the previous years.

3.1 Active participation and initiatives

The DSIC students; students with visual impairments, motor disabilities and deafness face great difficulties in their lives, especially in completing their university studies, but DSIC help them to respect themselves and to rely on themselves. DSIC is

Table of No. of students enrolled at CDI-IUG

Academic Year	No. of Students*	
	Creative technology program	Computer and smart device maintenance program
2015/16	97	17
2016/17	31	32
2017/18	--	42
2018/19	--	32
2019/20	--	19

* The decrease in the number of deaf students is due to the decrease in the number who finish high school.

sharing its experience and expertise with other institutions, such as Palestinian universities in Gaza opening their own DS centers. Currently, the DSIC is running a series of customized training programs for other Palestinian universities in Gaza and the Atfaluna Society for Deaf Children.

3.2 Stories of Success

This program was successful, resulting in a change in the lives of deaf students integrating them in their communities with full rights, equal to their non-deaf peers.

One of the female students who graduated from the program was able to find a job opportunity in Net Steam, which is a company for internet and communication services. Due to her good performance, the company adopted integrating people with hearing disabilities into its program. The company started changing its environment to facilitate communication between her and the local community, by translating all guide signs into sign language. The staff of the Islamic University was trained in sign language; the number of staff willing to learn sign language indicates the university's increased awareness of the issues relating to disability. Consequently, communication between deaf students and different departments of the university is becoming easier day by day and the university is transforming into an environment which supports the integration of people with disabilities.

4 Problems and challenges

- Poor reading and writing of students with hearing impairment.
- Lack of specialized sign language interpreters.
- Teachers' lack of knowledge of the characteristics of students with hearing disabilities.

5 Future prospects and projects

The university recently won a project in the field of inclusive education 'Empowering teachers for inclusive education in Palestine' in partnership with European and Palestinian universities in the Erasmus Plus program grant. This project led to a joint master's project in inclusive education in Palestine. It prepares specialized teachers in the field of inclusive education for students with hearing disabilities and long-term residency in education, vocational training, training and educational projects devoted to vocational and school education and training in the field of education.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

The DSIC and deaf education at CDI has enjoyed great success over the last five years, as it has been able to make a difference in its deaf students' and graduates' lives. However, it also faced problems and challenges that it needed to overcome and was able to make plans to do so. Basically, this paper presents the DSIC and CDI as a case study, which looks into the center's achievements and challenges.

- Providing a unified academic reference guide in sign language.
- Working on developing the skills of sign language translators through intensive specialization courses.
- Adapting curriculum textbooks for students with hearing disabilities.
- Instructing teachers about the characteristics of students with hearing disabilities.
- Exerting extra efforts towards integrating deaf students and students with hearing disabilities into the labor market through job creation programs or projects.
- Increasing fields of specialization to cover new topics and new qualification majors.

References

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