When Academic Programs at Higher Education Institutes Do Not Meet the Market Needs: A Case Study in Saudi Arabia

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CASE DESCRIPTION

This case study aims at improving complex problem-solving skills in academic leadership. This presents a real challenge in the Saudi Arabia education system wherein a vital gap exists between the outcomes of higher education institutes and workforce demand. When academic programs mismatch the quality and quantity of human recourses needed in the marketplace, the issue becomes a public dilemma. This case required academic leaders to go through a systematic problem-solving model to propose effective solutions for the challenge introduced. The case presents a real problem of high unemployment rate among undergraduate students in special education field with some compelling contextual and professional factors. Teaching notes and critical questions are included.

CASE SYNOPSIS

This section should present a brief overview of the case, with a maximum of 300 words. According to the journal, "Be creative. This will be the primary selling point of your case.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, a huge number of special education graduates have protested the issue of high unemployment rates in Saudi Arabia. While an enormous number of families are suffering from children with special needs, schools are not prepared to deliver adequate services for these students and have not responded to inclusion policies (Aldabas, 2015; GAStat, 2016). Therefore, these families are forced to search for educational services in nearby countries, such as Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, to name a few. Meanwhile, graduates from Saudi public universities with B.A. degrees in various special education fields are left without jobs (Al-Kharji, 2014). This misalignment between the number of graduates and available professional jobs is a pressing and growing issue in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the region, with a population of over 32 million. Most of the Saudi population (65%) is concentrated in three major regions: Riyadh, Makah, and the Eastern Province (GAStat, 2016). The Ministry of Education is responsible for providing free and appropriate education services for students with special needs and disabilities. Special education initiatives began to emerge in 1962 when laws and legislation were established. It was also at this time that the special education unit of the Ministry of Education was founded to ensure free appropriate medical, psychological, social, educational, and rehabilitation services through public agencies. However, the underrepresentation of special populations in public education system has been a pressing issue since then (Aldabas, 2015). In fact, the lack of effective implementation of policies and laws, including assessment and interventions, has created a gap between the framework of these laws and provisions provided, resulting in minimal special education services for students with disabilities and increased hardship for families.

The purpose of this case study is to investigate a real-life problem in the academic field and to recommend a solution based on academic leadership principles and pressing contextual factors for various

stakeholders, where problem solvers are expected to provide the best possible solution to satisfy various stakeholders' needs. The case study is intended to achieve the following learning outcomes:

- Analyze the situation, define the problem, determine the stakeholders, set expectations, highlight challenges, and determine the short-term and long-term impact of the problem.
- Identify the key issues of the case through an analysis of the problem.
- Analyze the case using relevant theoretical, practical, and contextual information.
- Propose and recommend a possible solution and course of action for the problem taking into consideration short- and long-term impacts and various stakeholders' needs.

THEORETICAL LITERATURE

Identification and Intervention

The issue of identification and proper intervention is a critical one for individuals with special needs in any society. Early identification and intervention is an important step toward providing an effective service that should start at childbirth. Proper interfacing and alignment between the health and education agencies are crucial in tracking the development of individuals with special needs (Aldabas, 2015). Furthermore, the wide range and diversity of disabilities require genuine and dedicated efforts from various agencies and policymakers to enable special groups to become productive citizens in society and not dependents. Integration of policies, professional standards, quality services, and ongoing assessments and monitoring are necessary for an effective education system. Best practices for individuals with special needs, as indicated by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), support an inclusive education system that enables children and adults with special educational needs to realize their potential in normal and least restricted environment though receive differential education services that suits their special needs (Al-Gain & Al-Abdulwahab, 2002).

In 2012, the NCSE recommended policies regarding future educational school for students with special needs. Six principles were emphasized:

1- All children, irrespective of special education needs, are welcome and able to enroll in their local schools.
2- All educational support that is given to schools is allocated equitably, in line with students' needs.
3- All students with special education needs have access to available educational support based on their needs.
4- Students with special educational needs have an individualized assessment, which informs teaching and learning and forms one part of an ongoing and cyclical process and assessment, including intervention and review of outcomes.
5- Available resources are used to maximize and improve outcomes for children with support from educational service providers.
6- The parents' role as natural and primary educators of the child is respected.

Among the special education community, there is a general agreement that many students with special needs are thriving and making significant progress in school and life; thus, society must enable these students to participate and benefit from educational services to fulfill their potential. Educating students with special needs entails comprehensive effort in making careful consideration for individual differences, developmental needs of students, best assessment and intervention methods, and application of research findings. This process involves planning in a systematic way, facilitating arrangements of teaching, adapting equipment and materials, and making learning accessible to those individuals. The challenge, however, is that these groups are diverse in their

prevalence, disability type and severity, traits, learning conditions, appropriate assessment methodologies, interventions, and responsiveness to educational services. Therefore, an individual educational plan is required.

According to the U.S. Department of Special Education (2006), a benchmark for Saudi Arabia special education statistics, the population of students with special needs represents around 12.8% of the school population and includes the following spectrum: learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbances, multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, visual impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury and developmental delay. In some developing countries, the population of students with special needs could be higher for various reasons (Heward, 2009). According to the General Authority of Statistic in Saudi Arabia, only the types of disabilities were documented, including difficulty with seeing, hearing, mobility, communication, cognition, and self-care. These types only represent around 3.3% of the total population (GAStat, 2016). In a quick comparison between Saudi Arabia and the U.S., a clear discrepancy exists in statistics and an underrepresentation in total number of students with special needs, the type of disability coverage, estimated number within and between groups, and the total number of students served in general (see Table 1).

Type of Disability	USA %	KSA %	Number Estimated in KSA	Number Served in KSA
Learning Disabilities	4.5	5	250,000	26,225
Speech or Language Impairments	2.7	2.9	145,000	
Intellectual Disability	0.9	1	50,000	20,579
Emotional Disturbance	0.7	.9	45,000	
Multiple Disabilities	0.3	0.3	15,000	490
Hearing Impairments	0.2	0.2	10,000	6,881
Orthopedic Impairment	0.1			4,530
Other Health Impairments	1.6	NA	NA	NA
Visual Impairments	0.1	0.1	5,000	3,214
Autism	1.1	0.7	35,000	1,464
Traumatic Brain Injury	0.1	0.1	5,000	NA
Developmental Delay	0.8	0.7	35,000	81

Table 1

Type of disability by the percentage of population in KSA and USA estimated prevalence numbers and actual numbers served.

Assessment of Students with Special Needs

Timely and appropriate identification and assessment are important factors in ensuring appropriate intervention for students with special educational needs. Assessment must be carried out by qualified teams and well-prepared professionals and must be done for the identification and intervention of students with special needs at

early age (Aldabas, 2015). Students' progress should be monitored to ensure that they benefit from the interventions and overall program or remedial steps have to be taken. Moreover, assessment should be used to consider arising student needs along with their progress after the intervention. Thus, a multidisciplinary team-based assessment is highly recommended, including a psychologist, medical practitioner, school principal, parent, teacher, qualified social worker, or therapist who provides health-support services to the child (Alnahdi, 2014; Alquraini, 2013). The purpose of the assessment process is to identify a student's educational needs to inform the development of the teaching and learning individualized plan (Individual Education Plan [IEP]). This assessment must be understood as an on-going process, which is used to inform intervention and as an integral part of the planning, teaching, and re-assessment of the outcomes. Unfortunately, there is a limited availability of educational assessments for children with special educational needs. Even when available, international standards of team-based assessment are not followed in Saudi Arabia (Alnahdi, 2014).

Inclusive Education

According to the report, "Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education" (Unesco, 2009), children with disabilities are still excluded from the educational systems. It is crucial that all children have access to education, and it is equally important that all students are able to partake in school life fully and allowed them to achieve desired outcomes that enable them to effectively participate in society in the future. Promoting inclusion in education means encouraging positive attitudes and the supporting social framework to cope with new demands in educational structure and governance. It was noted that in both developed and developing regions, the major challenge is how to attain high-quality equitable education for all learners, including those with special needs. Exclusion, however, can start very early in life. When students with special needs are not given a chance to develop their full potential through proper education services early, families and society will suffer the consequences. The inclusion of all students in the education system contributes to the development and reform of the education system, minimizes poverty, and promotes the well-being of society. Thus, inclusive education is a means of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach all learners (Al-Mousa, 2010; Alhossein, 2014). The major impetuses for inclusivity in special needs education are access and quality.

Even though special needs students are diverse in their needs, schools must be accommodating through a continuum of provisions within the policy of inclusion from full-time enrollment in mainstream classes to full-time enrollment in special schools or rehabilitation centers with a variety of options, and all levels in between. Three levels to address the range of placement of these options could be available in the education system (Stehlik, 2011):

Level 1: Mainstream classes, where students with special educational needs receive additional attention from the classroom teachers by using a differentiated curriculum or through co-teaching support.

Level 2: Special classes in mainstream schools.

Level 3: Special schools, which have been designated by the Ministry of Education, or other agency, for a particular level of disability.
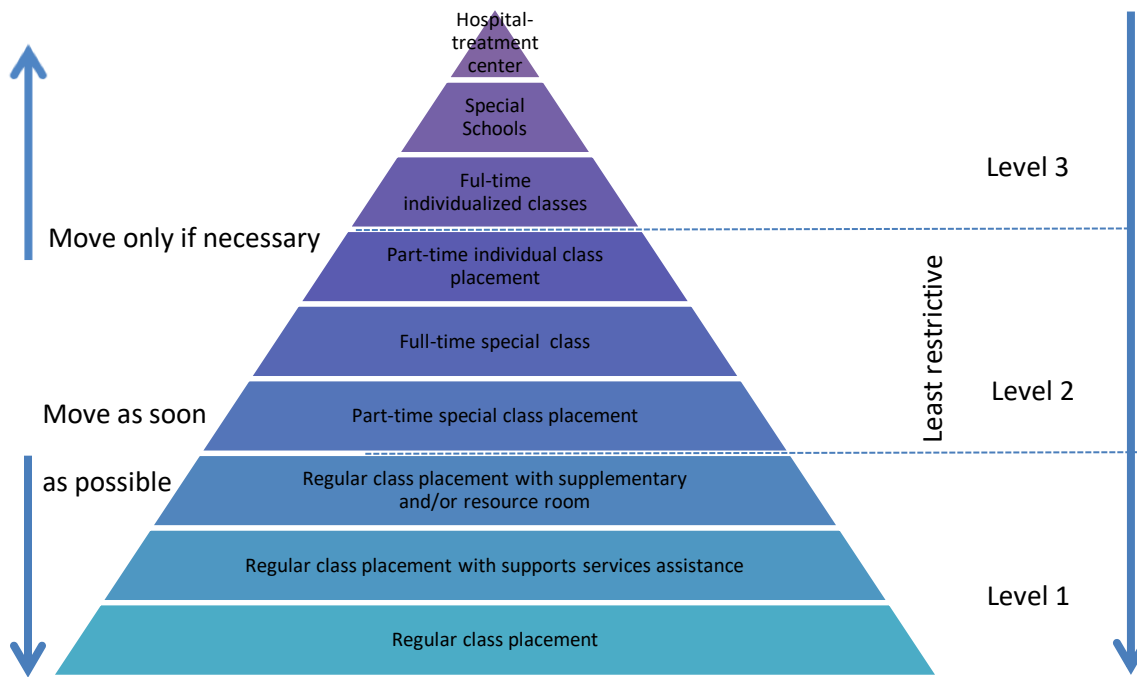
Figure 1

Continuum of placement for providing the least restrictive environment (Stehlik, 2011).

Whenever possible, students with special needs must be placed in the least restrictive environment for their benefit and for the benefit of society (Aldabas, 2015). Inclusion is a genuine effort of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth, and adults through increasing participation in learning, culture, and communities and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. Inclusion can positively impact education, society and the economy. Unfortunately, public schools in Saudi Arabia are not prepared for inclusive education to address the needs of its diverse population (Aldabas, 2015). If inclusion is achieved, it has the means to empower all children to have access to education. By being non-discriminatory against some groups or members, inclusion has a positive impact on individuals, social welfare, and the economy. Inclusion can stimulate education systems by establishing less costly schools to educate all children to meet their maximum potential, thus expanding societal human resource capital.

Teacher Education

Researchers have noted that providing high-quality special education services to individuals with disabilities necessitates the hiring of education experts in addition to ensuring other support services to the system (Aldabas, 2015). Though evidence from the research literature is consistent and illustrates that the key factor in student progress (including those with special needs) is access to and instruction from experienced and qualified teachers. The First World Report (2011) on disability states that appropriate training of mainstream teachers is crucial in teaching diverse special needs students. Thus, the critical principle is that education stakeholders should invest in teacher training, which should be about values and attitudes, rather than just limited to knowledge and skills.

Quality and inclusion are not contradicting concepts in education; instead, they are reciprocal. Preparing teachers to effectively teach diverse groups in a regular classroom is the key to a successful educational system.

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2010) draws on policies and practices from 25 countries and indicates that the core values of inclusive teachers should include:

- Valuing learner diversity
- Supporting all learners by having high expectations for all learners
- Working with others
- Continuing professional development

Prior to 2018, students who were admitted to undergraduate special education programs in Saudi universities were taught by high school students who had no formal training or education in the teaching profession in general. Teachers of students with special needs must be experienced and qualified educators who have had training in education. The field of special education cuts across many disciplines simultaneously, which adds complexity for preparing professionals in this field (Al-Gain & Al-Abdulwahab, 2002). In K-12 teacher education programs, students are exposed to various foundations of knowledge: psychology, education, professional education, domain-specific knowledge (math, art, humanities, science, social sciences, etc.) in addition to other college requirements. Additionally, for special education teacher programs, more discipline areas are introduced, including psychology and development of special needs, assessment, intervention, and professional training. The current teacher education programs face an enormous challenge balancing the depth and breadth of knowledge, skills, and professional training for teachers. Even though there are over 30 universities in Saudi Arabia that focus on undergraduate level degrees in special education for a wide range of special needs, the outcomes are not satisfactory for various reasons (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2002). These programs lack in-depth knowledge and training for special needs students and a huge number of graduates are awarded B.A. degrees every year, more than the actual needs in the teaching profession, as announced by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Civil Services. Furthermore, graduates are not prepared to teach subjects in schools. Even if we assume that they have sufficient understanding of special education fields, their roles are limited to resource room specialists who help the regular classroom teacher in IEP. These issues challenge the quality of inclusion in the classroom. In addition to all of these factors, graduates do not have the experience in and/or basic knowledge in general education, which adds a vital challenge to demand inclusive teachers, especially those working with diverse groups of students with special needs.

Another challenging dilemma for teacher preparation programs is related to the number of BA programs that are open for enrollment to students who are fresh high school graduates. In 2011, over 20 special education programs awarded BA degrees in special education across the KSA. The enrollment in these programs exceeded 25,000 students, while jobs available, as announced by the Ministry of Civil Service did not exceed 200 posts, leading to high unemployment among those graduates.

The plethora of special education undergraduate programs have also raised another critical issue pertaining to the availability of qualified human resources, specifically faculty members, who are needed to respond to the huge demand of colleges. Ironically, colleges have hired unqualified personnel to meet the demands of special education programs. Higher education institutes compete in the same pool to attract faculty members with various other Arab countries since the teaching language is Arabic. This has resulted in poor quality teacher education programs for students with special needs.

Analysis of Key Issues

Given the situation illustrated in this case study, several key issues with regard to various levels of leadership in academia have been raised. In your opinion, how could these issues be addressed, and what solutions could be suggested to overcome this problem for academic institutes? Take into consideration the

following SWOT analysis, as shown in Table 2, and key issues as you analyze the case and discuss with your team the best possible solutions with solid justifications. Recommendations for various stakeholders are required with justifications of the proposed solutions and implications.

	Hopeful	Harmful
Internal	**Strengths** • Need for inclusion • Accessibility or resources • Need for training • ….	**Weaknesses** • Less attractive degree • Low program quality • Unqualified faculty members • …
External	**Opportunities** • Many underserved students • Many faculty members and departments • Many categories of special needs students • …	**Threats** • The high rate of unemployment • Many programs exist • Stigma • …

Table 2 SWOT summary

1- **Unemployment**: An enormous number of graduates of special education teacher programs are unemployed because the Ministry of Education is not offering jobs, while there are a huge number of unserved special needs students.

2- **Alignment**: There is a misalignment between the Ministry of Education's needs for teachers who are qualified and experienced to respond to the inclusion strategy and the quality of graduates coming from various colleges of education programs.

3- **Quality**: The quality of special education programs that prepare the inclusive teacher, who will empower all K-12 students to fulfill their potential, must be addressed.

4- **Coverage**: There is a need to accommodate a huge number of excluded special needs students in K-12 education, including accommodation and support for their families.

5- **Differentiation**: Educational services must be provided that accommodate and address all students' needs as a mean to inclusive education, which will enable them to make a smooth transition into adult life.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the issue of unemployment among the special education teachers is a major challenge for Saudi Arabia. The scenario in this case study illustrates an issue of leadership at various levels, from policymakers to education service providers. The misalignment between roles and expectations of various stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, universities, department chairs, committees for academic program development, policymakers, families, and graduates, has escalated to a serious challenge where over 50,000 young people are left with no jobs, even though the government has spent billions of riyals over the years to develop their potential. Further, university graduates have spent and worked at least four years of their lives studying to earn professional degrees in special education. While there is a huge demand for special education intervention from families and the special education population, no job postings from the Ministry of Education are being offered. This issue has led some of our youth to work in low-paying professional jobs that are not suitable for their ambitions; others are demotivated and choose careers in this path. Many others have begun to

blame the government for not taking proactive action to address this issue. Ultimately, an enormous number of families and their special needs children are seeking alternative educational systems in the region to help educate their children and receive a better educational opportunity. The misalignment between the market need, policymakers, government-regulated agencies, and universities has resulted in such a dilemma.

In light of this problem, leaders must analyze the issue from various perspectives, including all agencies and stakeholders, and determine the short-, mid-, and long-term impact of such issues. Evidence has to support their arguments, and counterarguments have to be considered. A viable and comprehensive set of criteria to judge the proposed solutions must be discussed and provided. The solution has to consider the status quo and the future preventive measures for such problems. The solution will be evaluated based on the proposed criteria and the innovative solutions to the problem.

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