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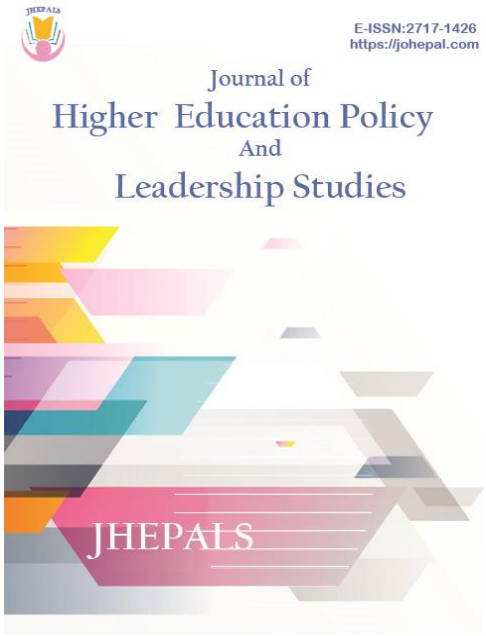

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Role of Academic Leadership in Supporting Students with Disabilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines the experiences of academic leaders in Saudi universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It employed semi-structured interviews to gather data on the schools shutting down and transitioning to online education concerning their role in supporting students with disabilities and the challenges faced by academic leaders during this time. Three main themes emerged from the interviews. The first theme was "shifting to remote learning", which highlighted the efforts made to adapt to modern technologies and maintain educational continuity during the closures. The second theme, "ensuring equitable access", enlightened the unpredictable and ever-changing nature of the pandemic. The interviews reveal the constant need for academic leaders to adapt their leadership strategies and decision-making processes as current information and guidelines emerge. The third theme, "supporting faculty, students and their families," focuses on the concerns and challenges faced by principals regarding teachers and students with special needs and their families. The study concludes by exploring how the transformative experiences of the pandemic may shape future academic leaders in crises. It provides valuable insights into the academic leadership in Saudi Arabian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic along with important implications, limitations and future research direction.

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Keywords: Academic Leadership; Students with Disabilities; COVID-19 Pandemic; E-Learning, Management; Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic was first reported in 2019, few people understood how much the virus would disrupt normal life. In 2020, several studies were published on the impacts of the virus across different populations (Such as Kools et al., 2020; Kruse et al,.2020; Tremmel et al., 2020; etc.). One of the most impacted demographics was the student population (Sundeen & Kalos, 2022). Because of the eventualities of COVID-19, many schools resorted to remaining closed until safety was guaranteed (Bradley, 2020). Furthermore, across the globe, governments issued directives compelling schools to remain closed as part of the measures employed to reduce the rate of infections across different populations (Tahat et al., 2022). While students stayed at home, various researchers delved into studies hoping to find specific approaches that could advance learning. In these studies, the key considerations included interventions schools could employ to safeguard learners as education resumed in some institutions (Pittman et al., 2021). One of the key areas that researchers highlighted in this regard was academic leadership. This dimension of intervention has proven especially beneficial in developing relevant solutions that educators can adopt within their respective settings to advance educational goals.

The pandemic brought about significant disruption across various sectors, and the education system was no exception. University rectors, who are accustomed to dealing with daily challenges and conflicts, found themselves facing a crisis unlike any they had experienced before (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). As the World Health Organization declared the pandemic on March the 11th 2020, schools had to quickly adapt and implement new procedures to ensure the safety of students and staff (Bailey & Breslin, 2021). This included the rapid transition to online education in many countries, including Saudi Arabia.

The school system is not just an institution for learning; it is also a crucial part of modern society (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020). During the pandemic, academic leaders played a vital role in maintaining a sense of normalcy and providing care for staff, students, and families (Cowen, 2020). However, universities faced the challenge of managing the crisis without established guidelines. Previous research on crisis management in educational institutions focused on acute crises such as school violence, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding managing a prolonged and complex crisis like a pandemic (Yokuş, 2022). Therefore, our study aimed to explore the role of academic leaders in Saudi Arabia during the pandemic and identify the significant lessons they learned.

University management teams typically deal with minor crises, conflicts, and daily challenges in their institutions. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique and unfamiliar crisis for them, as they had limited experience in handling such a prolonged and complex situation (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). The declaration of the pandemic disrupted the usual educational routines and plans, leaving universities uncertain about how to proceed. They had to quickly adapt and implement new procedures to minimize the risk of infection and ensure the safety of students and staff (Bailey & Breslin, 2021). In Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, schools and universities swiftly transitioned to online education (Tanveer et al., 2020).

The university system is not only important for education and learning but also plays a crucial role in society (O'Connell & Clarke, 2020). During the pandemic, the educational sector played a key role in maintaining a sense of normalcy and providing care for students

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and families. However, there were no established protocols or guidelines on how to manage the system during a pandemic. University management had to rely on their improvisational skills and find their way, often with little guidance. Previous research on educational leadership during crises has predominantly focused on other types of emergencies and is limited in the context of a pandemic.

This study addresses the role of academic leadership in upholding and safeguarding the learning interests of students with disabilities. It will advance the rhetoric of equality across learning spaces and underpin how leaders can address interests more effectively in the future. To address these perspectives, it is imperative to take a retrospective approach to the issue and assess the shortfalls that might have impeded leaders from supporting the interests of learners with disabilities during the pandemic (Clarke & Done, 2021). Because of the uncertainty attributed to a pandemic, including that of the 2020 pandemic, it is notable that leaders have a significant role to play, including mobilizing resources and participating in policymaking processes to ensure that students' learning interests are safeguarded effectively (Maas et al., 2020). The goal is to develop a theoretical paradigm that can help elaborate the interactions between effective leadership and the realization of desired outcomes in the students with disabilities population (Bradley, 2020). A qualitative approach will consider the significance of several factors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and factors related to leadership in the educational landscape, as well as provide comprehensive and conclusive results encompassing the nature of interventions that should be implemented to cushion members of the population from future challenges.

Literature Review

Between 2019 to 2022, several studies encompassing the role of leadership were published (Aagaard & Earnest, 2021). While these publications incorporate different perspectives of what transpired at the onset and throughout the pandemic, their common point of view is that the pandemic impacted university students disproportionately. Their deductions in this regard are mainly based on the educational outcomes reported. Some of these studies focus on the initiatives adopted by different leaders across the globe as the pandemic developed. More importantly, they recommend the direction that education leaders could consider adopting to safeguard the interests of students with disabilities in similar situations in the future.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a crisis in the education sector, forcing universities to shift to online learning. Many institutions that adopted a shared leadership model were able to switch to remote learning as they had more flexibility, creativity, and cooperation among their stakeholders. This model enabled them to respond effectively to the challenges and opportunities of online education (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). However, it remains uncertain whether the world is prepared to provide online education without compromising its quality. The pandemic has highlighted the challenges of ensuring an undisturbed education system while implementing necessary precautions. The main goal is to effectively transition from traditional to online education. Saudi Arabia was quick to adopt online education during the pandemic and the kingdom implemented a swift strategy for the transition during the crisis (Frad & Jedidi, 2022). In their research, Frad and Jedidi (2022) highlighted how Saudi Arabia had already introduced online education in previous years, and the pandemic

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served to accelerate its popularity and development. They found out that to succeed in this sector, teachers must have a deep understanding of educational technology and online teaching methods. They also need to engage students in more interactive online learning resources. However, academic leadership played a crucial role in supporting students with disabilities during the pandemic. With the sudden shift to online learning and the closure of campuses, students with disabilities faced unprecedented challenges that required innovative and thoughtful solutions.

Academic Leadership: Definition

According to Ervay (2006), to improve the quantity and quality of student learning, it must be directly supported by academic leadership through teachers, administrative leaders, and professional support staff. In terms of academic leadership, Ervay (2006, p. 78) considers

> Anyone who regularly leads a decision-making and action-taking process in curriculum, instruction, and assessment of student learning can be called an academic leader. True academic leadership can improve conditions associated with teaching and learning in today's schools by including specific processes in administrator and teacher job descriptions, and by strengthening organizational support structures.

Moreover, all of them are academic specialists with leadership and management functions (Hecht, 1999). Other researchers view the term as a designation for academic professionals who were pioneers in their disciplines, and still others view it as a designation for a characteristic of a particular individual who is recognized by their peers as an academic leader (Taylor, 2005; Trowler & Knight, 1999). Thus, Barnett and Tichy (2000) described academic leaders as the more actors understand their situation, the better they can judge and take action to anticipate the situation. The duty of the leader encompasses various responsibilities in their capacity as both a participant and representative of the organization (Berdrow, 2010). Also, in their role as a participant, the head brings forth their own personal expertise, abilities, viewpoints, encounters, anticipations, and goals to fulfil the duties of their position. As an actor, the head "brings his or her individual knowledge, skills, perspectives, experiences, expectations, and objectives to the job" (Berdrow 2010, p. 500).

The assumption of this leadership role often occurs without sufficient notice, resulting in numerous departmental administrators assuming positions with limited formal training, minimal prior experience, inadequate comprehension of the intricacies and intricacies of the role, insufficient preparation to lead within a framework of shared governance, a realization that administration necessitates a transformative shift from professorial duties, and insufficient readiness to balance personal and professional lives (Gmelch et al., 2017). Furthermore, as the demographics of higher education and organizational expectations evolve, heads of departments find themselves operating in increasingly uncertain and complex institutional environments (Dopson et al., 2019). However, Gmelch et al. (2017) argued that the assumption of this leadership role frequently occurs abruptly, resulting in numerous departmental administrators assuming their positions without adequate formal training, substantial prior experience, comprehension of the intricacies and uncertainties associated with the position, readiness to lead within a framework of collaborative decision-making, awareness that administrative responsibilities necessitate a transformative shift

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from scholarly work, and preparedness to effectively manage their personal and professional lives (Gmelch et al., 2017).

Leadership and Policies

Aagard and Earnest (2021) produced a report encompassing the role of academic leaders at universities during the pandemic. Basing their study on two institutions, FASED and BioAdvances, the researchers highlighted some of the key considerations implemented at the time. Furthermore, through the study, they built a comprehensive perspective of how COVID-19 upended the lives of Americans and, more importantly, how the academic medical centres became the centre of focus. They contend that because of the new developments following the rise in COVID-19 cases, educational institutions faced a significant challenge in developing relevant interventions to meet the population's needs (Aagard & Earnest, 2021).

Ahmed et al. (2018) also contributed to the issue, taking note of the role of social distancing and the significance of the intervention in reducing the impact of the disease. In their view, the implementation of social distancing measures was intended to ensure that students and the rest of society remained safe from the impacts of the virus. In the study, the researchers opted to review some of the recent literature regarding social distancing policies. In their findings, they noted that from the 15 studies analyzed, the social distancing policy was found to be the most impactful measure in reducing the problem. They also noted that some of the decisions made by the educational leaders were based on the developments associated with the H_1N_1 outbreak in 2009. In response to these developments, the researchers noted that a reduction in the cumulative attack rate was achieved through the policy measures adopted across different learning institutions at the time.

Berjaoui and Karami-Akkary (2020) found in their case study conducted in Lebanon that what was required was a form of shared leadership in the form of strong faculty/teacher organizational commitment. This means that leadership responsibilities are shared between formal and informal leaders within the educational institutions' community.

However, it is important to note that although the faculty/teachers participated in academic decision-making, they did not have a direct role in administrative decision-making. This lack of participation in administrative decisions can be attributed to the cultural context of Lebanon, where an authoritarian leadership style is prevalent, leading to the perception that administrative decisions should be within the purview of formal leaders only.

Despite limited involvement in administrative decision-making, the study by Berjaoui and Karami-Akkary (2020) revealed that the faculty/teachers still demonstrated high levels of organizational commitment. This may be due to cultural factors or other motivating factors within the educational institutions' environment. The results of this study suggested recommendations for transforming schools into professional communities that embrace a distributed form of leadership. This would include inviting the faculty/teachers and incorporating their voices into administrative decision-making processes to create a more collaborative and inclusive leadership culture. By doing so, educational institutions can enhance faculty/teacher satisfaction, engagement, and overall commitment to the organization.

These recommendations are consistent with the idea of promoting a more participatory and democratic approach to leadership, where faculty/teachers' experiences

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and insights are valued and used in decision-making processes beyond purely academic matters.

Moreover, the researchers analyzed the concerns related to the disruptions in the learning contexts while considering the case for integrated leadership. In advancing this perspective, the researchers noted that because of the high distress that followed the impacts of pandemics reported in the past, the decision-making model changed from an institutional to a multi-institutional framework. They noted that one of the key success factors in curbing the impacts of the pandemic in universities was the incorporation of faculty/teachers as the core of the administration process. By taking this approach, they noted that it was possible to underpin the most significant decision-makers and determine their role in the process.

Challenges Associated with Disruptions

Zembylas et al. (2022) provides comprehensive perspectives into the nature of challenges that educational platforms experience at times of crisis and, more so, the interventions that can be adopted to deal with such challenges. In their research, they consider the context of COVID-19, noting that most of the teaching experienced significant disruptions that consequently, impacted the university calendar. Field (2020) also provides remarkable perspectives into the nature of challenges associated with natural disasters in the context of higher education. The researcher noted that because of the need to align with the higher education program, including completing the set curriculum on time, educational administrators tended to remain oblivious to the nature of risks that could impact the program, leading to major disruptions in the learning process. Kools et al. (2020) also provide relevant perspectives on this subject, noting that administrators who oversee developing programs must have in place risk management measures that can aid in evaluating the nature of risks that can undermine the organization's ability to function optimally. Therefore, in addressing the problem, they suggest the need to ensure that universities operate as learning organizations where administrators make changes in the programs based on the challenges they experience, and which work toward the set academic goals.

Policies and Special Interest Groups

Some studies encompassing the impact of COVID-19 on educational landscapes cover the policies that were in place at the time and those implemented afterwards to address the challenges that arise across different social contexts. Shakespeare et al. (2022) provide some key insights into the regulations introduced at organizational levels to improve the learning experience and processes. They noted that in response to the challenges associated with COVID-19, a significant number of leaders determined that it was vital to develop new policies to address learners' interests across different sociodemographic settings (Aishworiya & Kang, 2021; Brandenburg et al.,2020; Whitley et al., 2021; Steed et al., 2022). However, they noted that one of the key challenges arising in the process was determining the students with disabilities impacted by the eventualities of COVID-19 and, more so, the extent to which the problem affected learning processes. They noted that the challenges associated with the special interest groups became more intense because of the developments.

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Consequently, they recommended developing priority-based strategies, noting that the approaches needed to be designed to ensure that the interests of special groups were considered. Araten-Bergman and Spigelman (2021) considered the same concerns, noting that one of the key considerations in dealing with COVID-19 entailed developing the best approaches that could be incorporated in addressing the interests of individuals with disabilities. They noted that in this regard, leaders sought specific strategies that could aid them in accommodating the special groups (Chamberlain et al., 2020). According to their perspective on the issue, the key problem related to the special interest group was that another significant challenge became evident because of the intervention measures set to limit social interaction. The provision of special needs relative to the group became an important concern, especially considering that even in a normal situation, those with disabilities faced substantial challenges in their pursuit of learning.

Student with Disabilities

Disabilities are a broad range of conditions that can affect a person's physical, cognitive, sensory, or mental abilities (MOH, 2023). According to the Ministry of Health in Saudi Arabia, there are several types of disabilities, including:

1. Physical Disabilities: These disabilities limit mobility or bodily functions. Examples include paralysis, muscular dystrophy, amputation, cerebral palsy, and spinal cord injuries. Physical disabilities can affect a person's ability to move, perform daily activities, or participate in physical tasks.
2. Cognitive Disabilities: These disabilities involve challenges in thinking, learning, understanding, or processing information. Intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and specific learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) are some examples of cognitive disabilities. Cognitive disabilities can impact a person's ability to learn, communicate, solve problems, or understand social cues.
3. Sensory Disabilities: These disabilities involve impairments in one or more of the senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, or touch. Visual impairments, such as blindness or low vision, and hearing impairments, including deafness or hearing loss, are common examples. Sensory disabilities can affect a person's ability to perceive and interact with their environment or communicate effectively.
4. Psychiatric Disabilities: These disabilities refer to mental health conditions that affect a person's emotional, psychological, or behavioural well-being. Depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder are some examples of psychiatric disabilities. Psychiatric disabilities can impact a person's mood, cognition, social interactions, and overall mental health.
5. Developmental Disabilities: These disabilities encompass conditions that emerge during childhood and impact a person's physical, cognitive, or behavioural development. Down syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, and cerebral palsy are some examples of developmental disabilities. These conditions can affect various aspects of a person's functioning, including motor skills, learning abilities, communication, and socialization.
6. Invisible Disabilities: Invisible disabilities are not immediately apparent to others but can have a significant impact on an individual's daily life. Chronic pain, fibromyalgia,

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chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple sclerosis, and certain mental health conditions can be considered invisible disabilities (MOH, 2023).

Several studies have focused on special needs students to develop relevant solutions. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) noted that academic leadership increasingly resorted to incorporating special resources and programs. The researchers noted that COVID-19 significantly impacted the psychological well-being of disabled learners, because of such developments, the administrators opted for counselling programs to empower learners. Further, the authors recommended three academic leadership practices that could be effectively employed in a crisis such as COVID-19. Included among the recommended leadership practices was utilizing the servant leadership model to empower and enhance the involvement of all stakeholders while placing the interests of others above their own. Hoggard (2021) also addressed the issue, noting that several institutions implemented online counselling programs, especially after determining the at-risk populations, including disabled learners.

Leadership consistency is among the key qualities that an academic leader needs to demonstrate while developing learning initiatives for learners during a crisis. While COVID-19 came with many unprecedented adversities that affected the entire education system across nations, most school leaders turned to online platforms where they could keep in touch with their students. Unfortunately, most leaders failed to offer alternative solutions for those learners living with disabilities, given that most of them could not use or access those digital platforms (Chalasani, 2021; Kruse et al., 2020). Crane et al. (2021) documented a range of challenges experienced by educational institutions serving students with special needs while exposing the inequalities observed in the provision of services by the government. The authors concluded by offering some creative and innovative solutions that should be implemented in such a crisis to include students with special needs. Among the recommended solutions by Crane et al. (2021) was that academic leaders must develop ways to keep in contact with families of students with special needs. In that regard, teachers were trained to interact with parents to benefit their children in their learning. Though helpful in some instances, there is still a long way to go, given that most school staff are not conversant with such interactions, and besides, there is a scarcity of effective parent-teacher education programmers (Cameron et al., 2022).

Parpala and Niinistö-Sivuranta (2022) also researched ways of bringing out the voices of academic leaders in universities and their experiences while leading and advocating for equity of online learning opportunities during the pandemic. Their analysis revealed that higher education academic leaders lacked the guidance, training, and support needed to face the adversities presented by the pandemic. The authors also demonstrated the need for educational leaders to work in collaboration as it would boost their work output by helping all students, including those with disabilities (Amka & Dalle, 2022). Given the strong likelihood of a crisis being experienced today, the study's findings remain relevant, especially in areas where higher education is affected. The concerned authorities would find it helpful to consult the insights provided by the survey should a crisis affecting university operations occur. Unfortunately, the research fails to offer defined solutions regarding the training that academic leaders need to acquire relevant skills to combat the adversities of a crisis. Thus, future studies must shed some light on the issue and provide specific training that academic

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leaders need to pursue as far as enhancing crisis management in universities is concerned (Makuyana, 2022).

Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological hermeneutic design to gain insight into the role of academic leadership in supporting students with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic based on their individual experiences (Khan,2014; James, 2016). The research process involved an iterative approach, where the experiences expressed by university management teams were continuously revisited and interpreted. To clarify and disclose any preconceived notions, throughout the analytical process, the researchers consciously confronted and adjusted their preconceptions based on the qualitative inquiry, in the end reaching a consensus on a new understanding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Sample

The study involved seven universities, with a sample of 9 male and 11 female teaching staff members as participants. The universities were selected to ensure diversity in terms of geographical location and faculties. They were in different parts of Saudi Arabia, including the Northern, Western, Eastern, and Southern regions. All the universities had students with disabilities. These universities are represented as an example of Saudi higher education institutions, with students from different socio-economic backgrounds. To recruit the participants, an initial phone contact was made, followed by obtaining informed consent and scheduling suitable interview times. All the participants had extensive teaching experience and had been serving in their current roles for over 10 years before the pandemic. The size of the facilities ranged from 3,000 students, and the participants managed no less than 15 employees (Table 1).

Table 1.
Participants' Characteristics

Type of disabilities	Faculty	Experience	Gender	Pseudonyms
Behavioural and Physical disability	Science	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 1
Blind and Vision disabilities-Physical disability	Education & Art	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 2
Behavioural and Physical disability	Science	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 3
Physical disability	Business administration	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 4
Blind and Vision Disabilities	Shariah	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 5
Blind and Vision disabilities-Physical disability	Sharia and Law	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 6
Behavioural and Physical disability	Business	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 7
Blind and Vision disabilities Physical disability -	Education & Art	More than 10 years	Female	Participant 8
Behavioural and Physical disability, Blind and Vision Disabilities	Business	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 9
Physical disability	Business administration	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 10

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Behavioural and Physical disability, Blind and Vision Disabilities	Education	Between 5-10 years	Female	Participant 11
Blind and Vision disabilities-Physical disability	Education & Art	More than 10 years	Male	Participant 12
Behavioural and Physical disability	Science	Between 5-10 years	Male	Participant 13
Physical disability	Business	Between 5-10 years	Male	Participant 14
Blind and Vision disabilities-Physical disability	Education & Art	Between 5-10 years	Male	Participant 15
Blind and Vision Disabilities	Shariah	More than 10 years	Male	Participant 16
Blind and Vision disabilities-Physical disability	Humanities and Social Sciences	More than 10 years	Male	Participant 17
Blind and Vision Disabilities	Education	More than 10 years	Male	Participant 18
Physical disability	Business administration	Between 5-10 years	Male	Participant 19
Blind and Vision disabilities-Physical disability	Education	Between 5-10 years	Male	Participant 20

Note. Participants = Academic leaders at universities.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Considering the amount of data anticipated for the research, the NVivo software was incorporated into the research analysis. The tool is considered effective in qualitative research methods because it can import data from any source. At the same time, it is the most convenient approach considering online interviews would be used to collect the data during the pandemic for safety reasons (MOH,2023). At the same time, the data analysis framework was chosen because of some of the components that would be used to present the data. More specifically, the platform incorporated attributes associated with developing queries and visualization.

Findings and Discussion

The data collected from interviewees identified three main themes: shifting to remote learning, ensuring equitable access, and supporting faculty, students, and their families (Table 2).

Table 2.
Emerged themes & sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Shifting to remote learning	Quick adaptation and planning Leveraging community strengths Customized solutions
Ensuring equitable access	Equity Issues Adapting Instructions for Virtual Settings Meeting Individual Needs
Supporting faculty, students, and their families	Ensuring Safety Communication Decision-making Supporting Lecturers Emotional and Mental Health Support Collaboration with Stakeholders:

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Supporting Students with Disabilities

Theme 1: Shifting to Remote Learning

All the participants highlighted that the shifting to remote learning was slightly difficult at the beginning, especially for students with disabilities compared to the students without disabilities as stated by Participant 18 "At the beginning of many students with disabilities lost interest in studying online because they don't have the abilities to use the platform … some students do not have laptop or computer or the places they live at it the signal was poor …"

Despite funding difficulties and limited resources, the challenges associated with delivering special education services during the pandemic were successfully navigated. Several key accomplishments stood out by the 15 of the participants mentioned guide to success in Special Education Provision for those students at universities in conditions smaller to the pandemic as follows:

Quick Adaptation and Planning:

> ''Recognizing the urgency, Saudi universities quickly adapted and implemented remote instruction methods in alignment with state and federal guidelines …. This flexibility allowed for a seamless transition and uninterrupted provision of special education services''. (Participant #1)

Leveraging Community Strengths:

Rural communities possess unique strengths, such as stronger community ties and closer relationships between families, educators, and administrators. Few universities capitalized on these strengths to foster collaboration, resource sharing, and effective communication channels. This approach ensured that families received ongoing support and services tailored to their specific needs. As stated by most academic leaders

> ''many touters who have students with disabilities have direct contact with the student and the family via phone or what's up to make sure everything is okay and provide the support …" (Participant #11)

Customized Solutions:

Understanding that one size does not fit all, some universities adopted a personalized approach to special education delivery. Individualized education plans (IEPs) were adapted to accommodate remote learning, and alternative methods for therapy, assessments, and accommodation were developed to meet student needs. By tailoring solutions to each student, the district maintained a high level of educational equity and ensured students with diverse disabilities remained engaged and supported.

> "Ahhh …. Acutly at the beginning the student was not familiar with e-learning as well tutors, and the difficulty increased, especially with blind students. For example, guides began recording lectures and trying to find solutions to teach and guide blind students on using e-readers.". (Participant #3)

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Theme 2: Ensuring Equitable Access

Equity Issues:

The shift to online learning has magnified existing inequities, with some students lacking access to technology or reliable internet connections. Special educators have had to find creative solutions to ensure all students have the necessary tools for virtual participation and that no student falls behind due to home environment limitations.

Adapting Instructions for Virtual Settings:

The rapid move to virtual instruction has required special educators to quickly acquire new skills, technologies, and instructional strategies. Their challenge is not only to master these tools but also to ensure meaningful and effective engagement for students with diverse disabilities.

Meeting Individual Needs:

Special educators have faced the demanding task of accommodating the unique needs outlined in students' IEPs within the constraints of a virtual environment. This includes providing specialized services, therapies, and accommodations that were previously delivered in person, necessitating innovative approaches to ensure students receive the necessary support.

Seizing Opportunities and Embracing Innovation

Despite the challenges, faculties have embraced opportunities for growth and innovation:

Skill Development and Technological Literacy:

The crisis has accelerated the acquisition of new skills and heightened technological literacy among faculties. They have become proficient in using virtual platforms, multimedia tools, and digital resources to enrich instruction and engage students in an online setting.

Personalized and Individualized Instruction:

The virtual learning landscape has provided an opportunity for faculties to personalize and individualize instruction to meet each student's needs more effectively. Increased flexibility in scheduling and the use of personalized learning platforms enable educators to deliver specialized instruction and services tailored to the unique requirements of their students.

Collaboration and Support Networks:

Faculties have leveraged collaboration and support networks to navigate the challenges of remote learning. Sharing resources, strategies, and experiences with peers and families has resulted in the development of robust professional networks that foster innovation and problem-solving.

Theme 3: Supporting Faculty, Students, and Their Families

> "As Academic leaders, we have many responsibilities, and those responsibilities have increased during the pandemic period. Hence, we had to provide greater support, reassure everyone, and encourage them more than ever before… the services for students with disabilities were face to face… but with the pandemic,

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Supporting Students with Disabilities

> we learn who to provide and answer their questions in many ways". (Participant #6)

During the pandemic, university managers have played a critical role in navigating the challenges and ensuring the well-being and education of students.

Ensuring Safety:

> ''University managers have had to implement and enforce health and safety protocols recommended by health authorities, such as physical distancing, mask-wearing, and enhanced sanitation measures. They have also worked closely with local health departments to monitor and respond to COVID-19 cases or outbreaks within the school community". (Participant #9)

Communication:

Effective communication has been vital during the pandemic. The management has been responsible for keeping staff, students, families, and the larger community informed about university closures, reopening plans, changes in health protocols, and any other relevant updates. They have used various communication channels, such as emails, websites, virtual meetings, and social media, to disseminate information. (Participants 6, 4, 5, 18 & 20)

Decision-making:

> ''University leaders have had to make critical decisions regarding remote learning, hybrid models, or personal instruction based on local health guidelines, community needs, and available resources. These decisions have had a direct impact on students, staff, and families, requiring thoughtful and informed leadership''. (Participant #17)

Supporting Lecturers:

All the participants in this study highlighted that as Participant #13 mentions

> ''leaders have provided guidance, training, and resources to support teachers in implementing remote or hybrid learning models. They have coordinated professional development sessions, facilitated collaboration among teachers, and addressed their concerns and challenges''.

Equity and Accessibility:

University leaders have recognized the importance of ensuring equity and accessibility for all students during the pandemic. They have worked to address the digital divide by providing devices and internet access to students who need them. They have also sought to minimize inequities in accessing resources and support for students with disabilities, and poor students.

Emotional and Mental Health Support:

University management has prioritized the emotional well-being of students, families, and staff. They have implemented strategies to promote mental health, provided counselling services, and connected families with community resources when needed.

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Collaboration with Stakeholders:

Leaders have collaborated with various stakeholders, including district officials, teachers' unions, parent-teacher associations, and community organizations, to make decisions, gather input, and address concerns. Their ability to build partnerships and engage stakeholders has been essential in navigating the challenges of the pandemic.

Future Planning:

The leadership have engaged in long-term planning to ensure continuity and preparedness for future challenges. They have reviewed and updated emergency response plans, explored innovative instruction and assessment methods, and considered the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic on student learning and well-being.

Throughout the pandemic, university leaders have demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and dedication to serving their school communities. Their leadership has been instrumental in guiding their institutions through uncharted territory and ensuring the education and safety of students amidst unprecedented challenges.

Conclusion

The overall goal of the research was to determine the most critical factors impacting the role of academic leaders in universities in safeguarding the interests of disabled students in pandemic situations. The biggest motivation for the study included the learning outcomes of disabled students which, according to emerging reports, were significantly low. The input of the qualitative approach is, therefore, essential, especially in identifying the most critical factors that academic leaders should consider when supporting the student's interests. The study has focused on populations that have reported the highest number of disabled individuals in this setting, and where it is possible to realize the highest outcomes. Furthermore, the overall objective targeted policy development, considering that implementing policies to improve the interests of special needs groups has produced the best effects in the past. The anticipated results agreed with the deductions made in recent reports, including the significance of stakeholder interaction and interaction with legislative administrators to address the learners' interests. Moreover, the research has helped in highlighting some of the strengths and weaknesses, depending on the issues reported during the pandemic. The findings of other studies also informed the approach that was used. This helped in the formulation of the theoretical paradigm designed to determine the most significant areas that academic leaders needed to consider when developing solutions. It was also notable from previous studies that several intervention strategies needed to be adopted to overcome challenges associated with learning and other social contexts. It was determined that such an approach could be adopted using similar measures to address and improve the learning outcomes of students with disabilities.

Academic leaders must ensure that all students have equal access to the curriculum and resources. This may involve providing assistive technologies, such as screen readers or closed captioning services, to facilitate learning for students with visual or hearing impairments. Moreover, academic leaders should collaborate with faculty to modify instructional materials and assignments to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. Another important aspect of academic leadership during this crisis was the

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provision of emotional and mental health support. Many students with disabilities experienced increased anxiety, isolation, and stress due to the sudden changes in their learning environment. Academic leaders should work closely with counselling services to offer virtual support groups and individual counselling sessions, allowing students to navigate and address their emotional well-being. Additionally, academic leaders should actively engage in dialogue with students with disabilities to better understand their specific needs and challenges. By soliciting feedback and encouraging open communication, they can tailor their support strategies and implement appropriate accommodations effectively.

In conclusion, academic leadership played a vital role in ensuring that students with disabilities received the support they required during the pandemic. By prioritizing equal access, providing emotional support, and fostering open communication, the leaders created an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

The limitations of the study include the chosen approach to collecting data. First, the study strived to collect data from the universities' management team, which was relatively challenging considering the ability to plan for interviews with the members. At the same time, the data collection was limited to online interviews, which made it devoid of interpersonal interaction. Better interactions could have aided in collecting better information from the target group. It was necessary to limit the number of participants to fewer than 20. Such a small sample might have failed to provide generalizable data. Nonetheless, these limitations were addressed in terms of test interview questions on five arbitrators to examine the questions as a pilot test, which helped in addressing the possible bias that arose in the interpretation process. Future research in this field should address these issues to explore the best practices, strategies, and skills that can help academic leaders succeed in their missions.

Future research in academic leadership should aim to advance its theory and practice, as well as contribute to the improvement of higher education and society. By conducting rigorous and relevant research, academic leaders can enhance their knowledge and skills, as well as share their insights and experiences with others. Future research in academic leadership should also be collaborative and inclusive, involving diverse stakeholders and perspectives. It should also address the needs and interests of different groups and communities. Such research should be a priority for scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and society at large.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest to be cited here.

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Human Participants

There were human participants, all of whom consented to take part in this study. All other ethical considerations are observed in alignment with the authors' institutional policies and the journal's guidelines.

Originality Note

This manuscript is the original work of both authors and if others' works are used, they are properly cited/quoted.

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