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Closing special education bachelor's programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: an analytical perspective and solutions

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (KSA) closure of special education bachelor's programs (SEBP) has sparked controversy among specialists, but researchers have not yet discussed the reasons and alternative solutions. Therefore, the study examines the opinions of faculty members in KSA universities in special education on this decision in terms of its impact on the quality of education for people with disabilities (PWD) and explores alternative solutions for developing higher education policies. The study also aims to compare special education programs in KSA with those in international universities. The study used a mixed method to analyze the opinions of 20 faculty members from 4 universities in the KSA regarding the decision to close the SEBP, using interviews. The study also analyzed data from 20 websites of top international universities, comparing the results with the SEBP in Saudi universities. It then statistically analyzed the data using an exploratory sequential design. One of the most important results of the study is that 65% of the faculty disagree with Saudi universities closing their SEBP, while 35% support it as a positive step toward updating curricula and addressing teacher competency issues. The results of the study can support decision-makers in improving SEBP based on the needs of the labor market and society and enhancing educational and rehabilitation programs to support PWD in KSA. The study recommended proposals for integrating special education programs in Saudi universities, reopening the Bachelor of Education program, adapting curricula, offering master's and doctoral programs, and focusing on early childhood to primary school specializations, such as those offered by international universities.

KEYWORDS

closing programs, special education bachelor, mix method, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, faculty members, universities

1 Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) established special education departments to support PWD and provide a comprehensive educational environment that suits their needs. The efforts of the KSA in the field of special education began in the early 1960s, when the Ministry of Education focused on providing specialized educational programs and services for this category. Moreover, efforts have increased toward integrating students with disabilities into public schools and providing them with the necessary support, with the aim of achieving the principles of comprehensive education and equality. Therefore, Saudi universities began to establish bachelor's programs in special education in response to the growing need to qualify specialists to work with students with disabilities. These programs aim to provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary

to support PWD in diverse educational environments, whether in schools or specialized centers. The most prominent universities in the KSA that offer bachelor's programs in special education are King Saud University, King Abdulaziz University, Qassim University, Princess Noura University, Imam Islamic University, Taif University, etc. The bachelor's programs in special education also seek to provide students with theoretical and practical knowledge to prepare teachers who have the ability to adapt teaching strategies and methods for PWD. This is done to improve their ability to integrate effectively with their peers in public schools. The program also aims to raise awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities and their role in society, aligning with KSA Vision 2030's goal of achieving inclusive education and improving the quality of education and support services provided to the PWD in the KSA. In addition, the program seeks to bridge the gap in the labor market, which still has a significant need for qualified teachers in the field of special education in public schools and specialized centers (Al-Zahrani and Arafa, 2021).

However, in 2018, the Ministry of Education, No. (88247), decided to stop admitting students to the special education major and to close bachelor's programs in Saudi universities (Ministry of Education, 2020). The KSA Ministry of Education conducted a study to re-evaluate the offered academic majors and align them with labor market needs and modern educational trends, all within the framework of achieving the Kingdom's Vision 2030. The Ministry of Education discovered that the number of graduates from special education programs has increased, and some majors might not have enough job prospects in the labor market (Al-Bajali, 2018). Also, suspension can be part of efforts to raise education and training standards for special education professionals and focus on alternative vocational training programs or advanced qualifications (Ali, 2024). The discontinuation of the Bachelor of Special Education program may have positive effects in terms of redesigning the educational content and improving the quality of teacher preparation, but at the same time it may lead to a shortage of specialized cadres and affect the achievement of inclusive education and the quality of support provided to students with disabilities (Al-Zahrani and Arafa, 2021). Therefore, researchers should concentrate on examining the challenges society will encounter due to the closure of Bachelor of Special Education programs in KSA.

On the other hand, when comparing bachelor's programs in special education in countries around the world, we find that this specialization still exists in many universities, especially in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Al-Hwaiti, 2015; Cancarevic et al., 2021). The reasons for the continuation of the program are due to the great need for teachers specialized in special education so that all students with disabilities can obtain appropriate and high-quality education to achieve comprehensive education for them in schools, where inclusive education requires qualified graduates to implement inclusive strategies in public and private schools (United Nations, 2024). Universities are training teachers to comply with laws requiring schools to provide special educational services for PWD. Modern programs focus on assistive technology and advanced teaching methods that enhance interactive and supportive education. Mental and social health education is also crucial, enhancing independence and self-confidence. Global

universities continue to offer special education bachelor's programs, improving curricula to meet social, technological, and educational needs (Cohen and Macekura, 2022). Based on this result, the current research encourages researchers to conduct a study on the reasons for closing bachelor's programs in special education in the KSA; comparing these reasons with global trends may contribute to improving the rehabilitation and education strategy for PWD and providing solutions that enhance the quality of inclusive education in KSA.

Therefore, the current study aimed to explore the perspectives of university faculty members as experts and professionals in the field, which adds an objective and practical dimension to understanding the decision and its impact on university education and the future of special education. The study also clarified the impact of stopping SEBP on society positively and negatively, especially on the quality and level of education and training in centers provided for PWD. Additionally, this study aimed to illustrate the potential challenges that faculty members and special education departments may encounter due to this decision, thereby aiding in the understanding of potential obstacles at both the academic and educational levels. Additionally, this study examined alternative solutions and suggestions put forth by faculty members, paving the way for recommendations that could aid in the development of higher education policies that cater to the needs of both students and society. The research questions are as follows:

- What are the opinions of faculty members in special education about the decision to stop bachelor's programs?
- What are the pros and cons of canceling the decision to suspend bachelor's programs in special education from the faculty members' point of view?
- Is the decision to stop special education bachelor's programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia similar to the trends in international universities?
- What opportunities or alternative solutions do faculty members suggest after stopping bachelor's programs in special education?

2 Literature review

2.1 Special education policy

In 1987, the Legislation of Disability passed, marking the first legislative effort to formalize and regulate special education. The legislation guaranteed equal rights to those with disabilities, as is the case with able-bodied PWD, including equal access to education (Aldousari and Dunn, 2022). In 2000, the Disability Code mandated various agencies to enhance the accessibility of health, welfare, education, employment, and social services for PWD (Alquraini, 2011). The focus of laws and legislation was on expanding access to fundamental rights, but the regulations of special education programs also established new laws. Modeled after the US special education policies, the policy was introduced in 2001 after integrating aspects of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and the PWD Education Act of 1990 (Battal, 2016). The policy categorized students based on disabilities, specified the rights of learners with disabilities, and outlined the

obligations of parents and educators, as well as the eligibility assessment and evaluation procedures (Aldousari and Dunn, 2022). The policy also played a valuable role in highlighting the necessary services that learners must access in order to fully benefit from their individual education programs. These incremental efforts have been essential in improving the quality of special education in KSA over the years (Madhesh, 2023). Recently, the KSA has focused on achieving integration for PWD through strategic objectives that include all development paths and has paid special attention to developing education at all levels. The Ministry of Education has also stressed the need to renew the policy of preparing, qualifying, and developing teachers to enhance the ability of the education system to meet development requirements and labor market needs. The strategic objectives of the KSA's Vision 2030 align with the development of teacher preparation programs to keep up with the comprehensive technological and cognitive revolution (Al-Dawoud, 2024; Al-Zahrani and Arafa, 2021).

2.2 Department of special education in Saudi Arabia

The College of Education at King Saud University established the Department of Special Education—the first department dedicated to special education in KSA. Established in 1984, this department has been at the forefront of equipping personnel to work with special needs learners (Al-Mousa, 2010). While Hussain (2010) raised concern about King Saud University and King Abdulaziz University being the only institutions providing a bachelor's degree in special education, other institutions such as the Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University, Dar Al-Hekma University, and Arab Open University have since provided diplomas, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees in special education. Battal (2016) reports that Saudi universities have established more than 11 special education departments in the 30 years since the establishment of King Saud University's Department of Special Education at the College of Education. Keller et al. (2016) identified KSA as the standout country in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with over 21 universities providing bachelor's degrees in special education focused on diverse areas ranging from audio disability to visual disability, intellectual disability, autism and developmental disorders, and multiple disabilities.

Despite the quantitative improvements in the special education context, Al-Mousa (2010) emphasized the need for more personnel preparation departments in Saudi universities and colleges. The quality of special education in KSA has room for improvement (Algethami, 2022). Experts have identified research as an area that requires improvement. Madhesh (2023) concluded that there is a shortcoming in the understanding of inclusive education among the special education faculty members in Saudi universities, illustrating the lack of a unified definition of inclusive education in the KSA special education context. This is, however, not a unique KSA problem, as special education teachers in the US undergo different programs without a set standard (Young et al., 2023). For instance, the training of special education teachers on augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) in the US remains limited despite being identified as the best standard for instruction in

integrated schools (Andzik et al., 2019; Da Fonte et al., 2022). Andzik et al. (2019) noted that the failure to integrate AAC as a core part of the special education teaching curriculum implied that the knowledge was low and implementation was inconsistent among teachers who learned from different sources. Such findings emphasize the potential value of continuing and refining bachelor programs in special education under a common evidence-based curriculum crafted by the KSA Ministry of Education.

Over the years, the special education departments have evolved to integrate more evidence-based teaching. For instance, King Saud University's Department of Special Education has worked alongside the Division of Psychological Services for Exceptional Children and the Health Rehabilitation Department within the university to ensure evidence-based training of professionals who work with children with special needs (Al-Mousa, 2010). Hsiao and Sorensen Petersen (2019) identified the integration of evidence-based practices when training special needs teachers in universities as an essential aspect of improving the learning outcomes of students. The increased integration of evidence in special education in KSA has the potential to improve education outcomes over the long term.

However, in 2018, the Ministry of Education made a decision, No. 88247, to discontinue admission to the special education major and to close bachelor's programs in Saudi universities (Ministry of Education, 2020). The KSA Ministry of Education performed research to re-evaluate the academic majors available and match them with labor market needs and new educational trends, all with the goal of fulfilling the Kingdom's Vision 2030. The Ministry of Education determined that the number of graduates from special education programs has increased, and some majors may have insufficient career prospects in the labor market (Al-Bajali, 2018). Suspension can also be used to increase education and training standards for special education professionals, with an emphasis on alternative vocational training programs or additional certifications (Ali, 2024).

2.3 The importance of special education programs

Special education programs are useful in providing pre-service and in-service teachers with the skills needed to address the unique learning needs of learners with disabilities. As the standards for educating children with disabilities increasingly embrace mainstreaming and integration, special education programs equip teachers to deliver instruction in diverse learning settings with learners with disabilities (Kisbu-Sakarya and Doeniyas, 2021; Razalli et al., 2020). Teachers can train well-adjusted learners with these skills to interact seamlessly with their non-PWD peers, addressing their needs to enable them to effectively develop their cognitive talents despite their impairments (Shaw, 2017).

With special education associated with high attrition, special education programs play an important role in ensuring that high turnover does not significantly impact learning continuity and quality (Scott et al., 2022). In another study, Scott (2017) reported that insufficient training and preparation increase teacher burnout and the tendency to leave the profession. These findings emphasize

the importance of special education programs in ensuring that qualified teachers are not only available but are also likely to stay in the profession for long.

2.4 Faculty and education approach

Faculty members play an important role in determining how institutions of higher education develop their curriculum and train learners in readiness for professional performance. While examining the faculties in the KSA context, [Almutairi \(2020\)](#) identified the leadership and teaching roles as the key areas of responsibility that determine the quality of education. The researcher also identified poor leadership in KSA universities as a contributing factor to the low quality of output in the institutions. [Debettencourt et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasized the need for leadership personnel to have doctoral-level training to be effective in filling special education faculty positions.

During their analysis of the US context, [Montrosse and Young \(2012\)](#) and [West and Hardman \(2012\)](#) expressed concern about the persistent shortage of faculty in special education, which negatively impacts the generation of new knowledge and the quality of teacher training. The findings are consistent with an earlier study by [Robb et al. \(2012\)](#), which reported that most special education faculty positions were not filled despite growing demand for the programs. While there is limited research on the demand and supply of special education teachers in KSA, the previous findings from advanced economies such as the US with a long history in special education indicate that the perennial shortage in quality faculty might be a reality in KSA given its relatively short history in special education higher learning.

KSA trains special education teachers differently from countries such as the UK, USA, Australia, and Canada. These countries offer a Bachelor of Education degree, but they do not view it as a pathway to direct interaction and teaching for special needs learners. According to [Coates et al. \(2020\)](#), special education teachers undergo a postgraduate special education teacher development program, while some universities in the US, Australia, and Canada complete a Bachelor of Education degree with independent courses for people with disabilities to achieve inclusion. Some universities in the UK also rely on short programs to train special education teachers, but [Nash and Norwich \(2010\)](#) criticized these programs for not providing enough time for PWD education, negatively impacting the quality of teacher training. Therefore, KSA universities rely on training special education teachers through postgraduate studies, often using short programs.

In a recent study, [Algethami \(2022\)](#) found that there was a significant difference in the assessment of quality special education in favor of the postgraduate teachers relative to the undergraduate teachers in KSA. Another previous study also reported that special education teachers with advanced degrees were more effective in increasing student achievement compared to teachers who only had undergraduate degrees ([Feng and Sass, 2013](#)). Such findings demonstrate the knowledge gaps that exist between different levels of academic qualification, with higher achievement leading to better outcomes. Discontinuing the bachelor's program might

imply that postgraduate studies are the remaining pathway to knowledge development for special education teachers.

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Participants

The study focused on universities in the KSA that have special education departments, and it selected the top 4 universities based on their highest ranking in the World Times, a publication that evaluates universities on the quality of their academic and training programs ([Enaam, 2024](#)). The study selected the top four universities, representing all parts or regions of the Kingdom (Western, Eastern, Southern, and Central regions), based on their highest ranking in the Times. This selection was made from a group of 10 prominent universities in the KSA that include a special education department, in order to understand the perspectives of participants from various regions, excluding the northern regions. The Times does not rank northern universities. [Supplementary Table 1](#) displays the universities from which we selected participants, along with their respective numbers.

Following the identification of the four participating universities and all faculty members in department of special education, data at each selected university were limited; five participants from each university were randomly selected to avoid bias ([Benoot et al., 2016](#)). We conducted an inventory of all faculty members who hold the rank of Associate Professor and above, based on various criteria. We excluded members holding the rank of assistant professor, lecturer, and teaching assistant. Consequently, we conducted interviews with 11 members who hold the rank of associate professor and 9 members with the rank of professor, bringing the total to 20 members, as [Supplementary Table 1](#) shows the participants.

3.2 Study design and data collection

The research employed a mixed method since it amalgamates quantitative and qualitative methodologies to thoroughly address research inquiries, facilitating the integration of numerical data with contextual interpretations for enhanced analysis ([Hirose and Creswell, 2023](#)). Statistics on the number of universities discontinuing the Bachelor of Special Education program provided quantitative data. We provided qualitative data by conducting in-depth interviews with university faculty members to understand the motivations or reasons behind the decision.

Qualitative methodology utilizing a phenomenological framework grounded in semi-structured individual interviews: this refers to the views of participants regarding the cessation of the Bachelor's program in Special Education ([Rashid et al., 2020](#)). The semi-structured interview questions were designed based on a study of the available literature ([Able et al., 2015](#); [Van Der Steen et al., 2020](#)) and aimed to address the research issues. The interview questions were evaluated by four professors specializing in the special education department at Saud University, and their recommendations were utilized to refine and enhance the original questions. The reviewers recommended incorporating a question

regarding the obstacles encountered by public centers and schools, as well as the deficiency of skilled personnel in special education. Refer to [Supplementary Appendix A](#) for the interview questions.

After completing the ethical procedures and obtaining the participants' consent, the researcher sent the interview questions and steps via email. At the participants' request, the researcher conducted the interview over the phone and recorded it in writing to maintain confidentiality. We interviewed each participant for 30–45 min to gather detailed information about their experiences during the stoppage of the Bachelor of Special Education program, to delve into the reasons behind the stoppage and the issues it caused, and to explore potential solutions. In order to preserve the privacy of the participants, the names of the participants were coded with numbers (member 1, member 2,...). We conducted personal interviews during the first semester of 2024, following an agreement and prior appointment. Following the completion of the interviews with the specialists, we analyzed and transcribed the data, as indicated in the following [Supplementary Tables 2–4](#).

Quantitative Method: the study employed a comparative method, which is used to compare two different cases to understand similarities and differences ([Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019](#)). The study addressed the third question, aiming to compare the decision to discontinue SEBP in the KSA with those determinations made in international universities. We compared this decision with programs in international universities such as America, Britain, Canada, Australia, and China; we limited the study's research to the first 20 universities ranked in Shanghai in education, as shown in [Supplementary Table 5](#). We then individually searched the data on each university's website. In contrast, the researcher excluded the best universities in the years before 2023. Also, the researcher eliminated any university unrelated to education, including those from engineering, medicine, and other scientific fields. However, they focused on topics associated with bachelor's programs in special education in the mentioned countries, leading to data analysis of the 20 best universities in the world in the field of education ([Shanghai ranking, 2024 Shanghai ranking's global ranking of academic subjects.2024](#)).

3.3 Data analysis

We used an exploratory sequential design for the data analysis process, which focuses on presenting the qualitative information from the interviews first and supporting it with quantitative data from a comparative analysis between the websites of international universities and Saudi universities ([Hirose and Creswell, 2023](#)).

First, we imported the transcribed text into NVivo 10 software and analyzed it using qualitative content analysis ([Allsop et al., 2022](#)), a dynamic process that involved iterative movement between four steps. We conducted the procedure in accordance with established principles ([de Vries, 2020](#); [Allsop et al., 2022](#)). The procedure comprised (1) reviewing the transcribed text; (2) identifying meaning units; and (3) condensing meaning units to shorten them while preserving their essence and assigning codes to them. We analyzed the codes for similarities and differences and examined their underlying meanings to identify commonalities within subthemes. We examined and discussed subthemes to

identify the phenomena that connected them to a central topic. We categorized the data and identified and conceptualized the themes in relation to the research objectives. A colleague with expertise in special education conducted double coding for each interview to improve reliability and credibility, assessing and validating the coding forms. In addition, comparing qualitative results with quantitative results increases their reliability, as explained in the next step.

Second: To answer the third question, "Is there a similarity between the reality of current international universities and the decision to stop the bachelor's program in special education in KSA?" We used comparative analysis to look at the answers. We sorted all the information about the special education programs used in the universities shown in [Supplementary Table 5](#) and then compared the results based on a number of factors, such as whether the bachelor's program is still used, not used, integrated with other programs, or there are graduate programs or other programs. The statistics and the number of universities that continue to apply or not, along with the explanations and reasons derived from past studies, bolster the findings from the previous interviews.

4 Findings

The qualitative study data were analyzed to review the views of special education faculty members on the decision to stop the bachelor's programs. The focus was also on identifying the negatives and positives of this decision, through which alternative solutions to closing this program are identified. The topics were divided into three main topics and themes branched out from them, as shown:

- Special education faculty members think about the decision to discontinue the bachelor's programs.
- The decision to discontinue the bachelor's program in special education has both negative and positive implications.
- Opportunities and alternative solutions to closing the bachelor's program in special education.

On the other hand, the quantitative study data was analyzed to review the total number of international universities that have closed their special education bachelor's programs, as in the KSA, and to know the total number of universities that have not closed their bachelor's syllabi, unlike the Kingdom. Lastly, we aim to determine the total count of universities that have suggested or created alternative special education bachelor's programs and the degree of their alignment with the programs offered by universities in the KSA. The following sections delve deeper into each of these themes.

4.1 First: special education faculty members think about the decision to discontinue the bachelor's programs

According to the participants' responses to this question, the researcher divided their answers into two major

themes and seven subthemes. These are presented in [Supplementary Table 2](#).

A. Participant's opinion of the decision: The study revealed that 65% of participants disagreed with the closure of SEBP in Saudi universities, citing the decision as incorrect, shocking, ambiguous, unfair, and not based on clear indicators. They also argued that the decision did not align with the interests of the special education specialty, was not moderate, was aggressive, or harsh, and did not provide clear reasons or solutions for the closure. The participants advocated for a partial closure, pending the employment of previous graduates and the return of the program. On the other hand, 35% of participants strongly support the decision to close the program, believing it to be a positive and developmental step toward updating the programs and the field. Also, they strongly agree because it is an organizational decision to prevent the overcrowding of graduates in the specialization because there are qualified graduates, but at the same time there is no employment and there is no sufficient labor market.

B. Reasons for stopping the program: 60% of participants cited the overcrowding of graduates as the primary reason for the closure of the Bachelor of Special Education program. High unemployment rates and the random and unorganized opening of special education programs in universities delayed the decision. The need for special education programs outpaced the labor market, leading to a surge in graduates' unemployment. Decision makers and the media received reports on the issue, which resulted in the closure of the program. 50% of participants believe that experts closed the program to update private education programs to suit the labor market. They also believe that experts improved teacher efficiency by addressing poor stereotypes and setting a framework for developing teacher management systems, programs, and curricula, with 45% focusing on weak inputs.

4.2 Second: the decision to discontinue the bachelor's program in special education has both negative and positive implications

According to the participants' responses to this question, the researcher divided their answers into six major themes and nine subthemes. These are presented in [Supplementary Table 3](#).

A. Negatives of the decision for services provided to people with disabilities: 40% of participants believe that closing the bachelor's program would negatively impact PWD due to poor services, a lack of teachers, and reduced service availability. The community still recognizes the PWD category, and halting the program will impact support services for PWD. Merging different categories reduces service availability, potentially forcing some parents to withdraw their children from government schools and enroll them in private centers. The absence of a qualified human cadre will lead to a lack of high-quality service provision. The ministry's focus on administrative aspects may not align with academic development. Therefore, the system's impact on the field of work could hinder service integration.

B. Negatives of the decision for schools and special centers: the shortage of teachers negatively impacts services in private schools and centers, with 50% of results indicating this issue. Many schools struggle with special classes, and centers often ask

universities for qualified teachers but lack recent graduates, leading to the disappearance of special education. Also, this burden falls on general teachers with limited experience in dealing with PWD.

C. Negatives of the decision on the labor market: 45% of participants expect the closure of the Bachelor of Special Education program to negatively impact the job market and the success of KSA's Vision 2030 development programs. A shortage of human resources may hinder the comprehensive learning design, as teachers may face retirement or death. The program's suspension could also hinder the global competition for improving services for PWD.

D. Negatives of the decision for graduates: 50% of respondents believe closing the door on graduates negatively impacts professional problems, future work outlook, high unemployment, and the need for new generational qualifications to stay current with advancements. Moreover, 40% of graduates report psychological problems, including frustration, anxiety, lack of confidence, job insecurity, and lack of motivation, which can lead to a negative decision-making process. Finally, 35% of respondents criticized the decision to only consider graduates, citing social problems and undervaluing the importance of specialization in society, arguing that it lacks potential benefits.

F. Negatives of the decision for faculty members: the decision to close a special education program has negative consequences for faculty members, with 55% feeling burdened due to the small number of female students. This neglect of the specialty could result in financial damage and potentially lead to the elimination of certain areas of expertise. Additionally, the lack of a contemporary book sample hinders professors' creativity and desire to write and translate. Unfortunately, the decision did not take into account the statistics and future outcomes of faculty members who are sent to study abroad. Moreover, the closure of this program in special education has negatively impacted faculty members psychologically, with 35% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction when the program closed. The results also indicate that there is a lack of the scientific, cultural, and social activities that were once the department's backbone after losing bachelor's programs. The suspension of the program has led to a loss of passion and interest in the special education department. Universities are beginning to lose the spirit and backbone of their departments.

G. Positives of the decision: 60% of participants supported the closure of the bachelor's program, citing potential benefits such as appointing current graduates, reevaluating curricula, focusing resources on high competencies, encouraging international partnerships, studying the market, redesigning programs to be more specialized and flexible, offering advanced graduate programs or professional certificates, and increasing graduates' efficiency. Suspension could also help universities study the market and determine required specializations.

4.3 Third: opportunities and alternative solutions to close the bachelor's program in special education

According to the participants' responses to this question, the researcher divided their answers into one major theme and four subthemes. These are presented in [Supplementary Table 4](#).

Suggestions for improving the decision: 80% of participants offered suggestions and alternative solutions to improve the decision to close the bachelor's programs in special education. These suggestions include opening and resuming admission to the bachelor's degree in special education while avoiding previous problems. Additionally, efforts are being made to develop new specializations within the bachelor's degree program to align with the current labor market. Furthermore, it's crucial to control the quantity of students admitted into the special education sector, allocate the tracks to universities according to the KSA's geographical division, and establish the number of tracks in each university based on the labor market's demands.

60% of the participants suggested creating partnerships with other specializations and community partnerships with sectors. The establishment of community partnerships between special education departments in Saudi universities, sectors, and ministries, including the Ministry of Health and Human Resources, the Ministry of Development, and others, facilitates the training of workers in the field of special education. In addition, they suggested merging the special education specialization with other specializations in the College of Education to become one joint specialization, including subjects such as psychology, kindergarten, and sociology, as well as curricula and teaching methods. Moreover, special education courses should be included as basic requirements in other bachelor's degree specializations. Universities' special education departments need to adapt their plans to align with the demands of the labor market. Finally, the participants suggest that the university be an independent institution that makes its decisions alone, away from the Ministry of Education.

Conversely, half of the participants advocated for the establishment of alternative programs beyond the Bachelor of Special Education, such as short certificate or special education diploma programs, to equip general teachers with the necessary skills to work with both children with and without disabilities. These programs would fall under the purview of universities, not the ministry.

Finally, 35% of participants suggest focusing researchers' efforts on conducting statistical research to list all graduates in special education and the extent of schools' need for employees in special education. Moreover, they suggested establishing a general framework for developing the teacher management system, determining programs, curricula, etc., and, in particular, developing inputs because they are weak. Also, they recommended studying developments from time to time to compare the labor market and development needs.

4.4 Fourth: a comparison of the reality of special education bachelor's programs in international universities with those in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Based on [Supplementary Table 5](#), the research results revealed that the following countries (US = 14, UK = 1, Canada = 1, Australia = 1, China = 3) represent the top 20 universities in education. The results showed that 40% of universities still have a Bachelor of Special Education program within their

departments. In contrast, there are 35% of universities whose departments do not include a Bachelor of Special Education program independently. However, there are universities at a rate of 55% that integrate the special education specialization with other specializations such as psychology, early childhood, educational leadership, curricula, etc. These universities also focus on teaching and training general teachers in the primary stage in all their specializations so that the general teacher is able to deal with children with and without disabilities. Also, these universities offer short certificate programs such as diplomas and training courses for professionals to strengthen their scientific and academic skills to serve PWD. Finally, the results showed that 95% of universities have graduate programs specializing in special education independently, focusing on visual impairment, autism, applied behavioral science, technology, educational leadership, etc., with modern programs in the field of master's and doctorate degrees.

5 Discussion

The current study indicated that most of the participants from faculty members at various universities opposed the closure of the Bachelor of Special Education programs in Saudi universities, compared to a small number of participants who supported the closure of the program. Those who opposed the closure of this program considered it incorrect, shocking, ambiguous, unfair, and not based on clear indicators. They also saw that the decision was not in line with the interests of the specialization of special education and did not provide clear reasons or solutions for the closure. Participants called for a partial closure until previous graduates were employed and the program returned. The opinions of the participants opposing the decision to close the bachelor's program in special education in Saudi universities are consistent with the quantitative data examined from the websites of international universities to answer the third study question, which states: "Is the decision to stop SEBP in the KSA similar to the trends in international universities?" The website's data confirmed that most international universities (such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and China) in the field of education still have bachelor's programs in special education within their departments in the College of Education.

This is confirmed by [Kisbu-Sakarya and Doenya \(2021\)](#) and [Razalli et al. \(2020\)](#) regarding the importance of special education programs in universities to provide graduates or teachers with the necessary skills to deal with the special needs of PWD in schools. The aim is to enhance the quality of life and education for PWD, promoting their inclusion and integration. [Razalli et al. \(2020\)](#) also demonstrated that special education programs qualify graduates to provide education in diverse educational environments with learners with disabilities. Also, [Shaw \(2017\)](#) indicated that teachers or graduates can develop the skills of learners with disabilities to adapt to interacting smoothly with their peers without disabilities and meet their needs to enable them to improve their cognitive talents effectively despite their disabilities. In another study, [Scott \(2017\)](#) reported that special education programs ensure not only the availability of qualified teachers, but also the possibility of their remaining in the profession for a long time.

In contrast, there are a few international universities that agree with the opinion of closing the bachelor's programs in special education in Saudi universities. Their departments do not include a bachelor's program in special education independently. The participants who supported the decision considered it a positive and developmental step toward updating special education programs and stressed that it was an organizational decision to prevent the overcrowding of graduates in the specialization due to the lack of jobs in the labor market. Despite the differences in the opinions of the participants on the nature of the closure of the Bachelor of Special Education program, most participants agreed that the reason for stopping this program was the overcrowding of graduates, which led to high unemployment rates due to the number of graduates from special education programs exceeding the labor market. Therefore, this program was closed to update private education programs to suit the labor market, improve teachers' efficiency, and establish a regulatory framework to develop teacher management, programs, and curricula.

This finding is consistent with the study of [Al-Mousa \(2010\)](#) and [Al-Jathami \(2022\)](#), who emphasized the need to increase and improve special education outcomes through the preparation of staff in Saudi universities and colleges. Also, [Andzik et al. \(2019\)](#) noted that the failure to integrate reciprocal and alternative communication as a core component of the special education curriculum resulted in low knowledge and uneven implementation among teachers who learned from different sources. These findings highlight the potential value of maintaining and improving bachelor's programs in special education that follow a standardized, evidence-based curriculum developed by the Ministry of Education in KSA. Moreover, [Madhesh \(2023\)](#) determined that special education faculty in Saudi universities exhibit a deficient comprehension of inclusive education, highlighting the absence of a cohesive definition of inclusive education within the KSA special education framework. This issue is not exclusive to KSA; special education teachers in the United States also encounter many programs lacking a uniform norm ([Young et al., 2023](#); [Da Fonte et al., 2022](#)).

The results of the current study revealed multiple negatives and positives of the decision to stop the bachelor's program in special education. The most important negatives that affected the services provided to PWD are the shortage of qualified teachers and the lack of support services. The absence of qualified human cadres will lead to a lack of high-quality services. Consequently, the shortage of qualified cadres has led the Ministry of Education to focus on administrative aspects more than academic ones, which may affect the quality of education and hinder the integration of services. Additionally, the shortage of teachers negatively impacts services in private schools and centers. This is because each school includes special classes, necessitating the periodic hiring of newly qualified graduates to alleviate the burden on general teachers who lack experience in working with PWD. This also affects the disappearance of experts in special education. Therefore, this result contradicts the laws and legislation for PWD that seek comprehensive access and that PWD have the right to receive educational, psychological, and health services, and that education is for all ([Battal, 2016](#); [Al-Dosary et al., 2022](#)). Of course, due to the cancellation of the Bachelor of Special Education program, the field

of special education has become neglected, and this contradicts the rights and legislation for PWD.

Moreover, the results indicate that the decision has a negative impact on the labor market in the education sector and the success of development programs within the KSA's Vision 2030. The lack of human resources due to retirement or death disrupts access to inclusive learning designs, and the suspension of the program hinders global competition to improve services for PWD. [Al-Baqmi's \(2021\)](#) and [Abdul Qader \(2022\)](#) studies confirmed that the KSA's labor market issues stem from a shortage of qualified competencies and a high unemployment rate among college graduates. The gap between education outcomes and labor market needs causes this. The retirement of teachers and the increase in deaths also lead to an imbalance in the amount of work compared to the growth in the student body. Consequently, the increasing administrative burdens on teachers negatively impact their focus on education and the development of their capabilities. This confirms that the Ministry of Education made the decision to close the bachelor's program for special education after studying the labor market, and it was not a random decision. However, it appears that the problem lies in the lack of information and publication of sufficient data about the reasons for closing this program, as well as the development and discussion of alternative solutions with university faculty.

The study results also confirmed that closing the Bachelor of Special Education program for graduates negatively affects professional problems, future job prospects, high unemployment rates, and the need for new generations of qualified professionals to keep pace with developments. In addition, the results indicated that graduates suffer from frustration, anxiety, lack of confidence and job security, lack of motivation, and underestimation of the importance of special education in society. [Al-Awad et al. \(2020\)](#) highlighted the high unemployment rate among College of Education graduates, which they attribute to their inability to secure jobs that align with their specialization in the labor market. At the same time, [Al-Otaibi \(2022\)](#) and [Misk Academy \(2020\)](#) confirmed that, when analyzing the labor market, there is an urgent need for professional development for teachers in the College of Education and that they need new programs to enhance their capabilities and efficiency to keep pace with modern changes in education, with the aim of reducing unemployment and achieving sustainable development in the KSA. This result supports the closure of the bachelor's program in special education for a limited period, with the aim of developing curricula and qualified cadres to achieve the highest levels of education quality.

One of the most significant negative outcomes of the decision to close this program was the harm inflicted on faculty members in the Department of Special Education, primarily due to the increase in the number of experts compared to the number of female students. This resulted in the neglect of social specialization, exposure to financial issues, and the cancellation of certain areas of expertise. Additionally, the dearth of Bachelor of Special Education students impedes the creation of contemporary books and the translation of contemporary literature in the field. The study also confirmed that the decision did not take into account the number of future faculty members sent to study abroad. Additionally, the

majority of faculty members experience psychological distress and job dissatisfaction, leading to a decline in their passion and interest in the Department of Special Education. Additionally, participants hold the belief that the closure of the Bachelor of Special Education program has resulted in the department losing its essence and vitality within the College of Education. This, in turn, has led to a decline in the scientific, cultural, and social activities that the department once thrived on, particularly when it involved new students.

Hamed's (2018) study demonstrated that the poor quality of life at King Saud University, which is reflected in work tasks, professional interactions, teaching tasks, work expectations, salary, and rewards, leads to psychological stress among faculty members in the humanities colleges. This, in turn, negatively impacts their job satisfaction. This result is consistent with findings from most universities across various countries. Studies by Malin and Boufateh (2022), Mohamed and Al-Mahdi (2022), and Al-Rashidiya et al. (2024) confirm that work pressures adversely impact faculty members' psychology, resulting in their premature departure from work. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize the establishment of high standards for the quality of life in universities, as this will enhance the psychological wellbeing of faculty members and subsequently enhance the learning outcomes of graduates.

On the other hand, most of the results agreed with the positives of closing the Bachelor of Special Education program, including the appointment of current graduates after studying the KSA labor market. Also, closing the program helps reevaluate special education curricula with the aim of improving graduate outcomes. The program concentrates its efforts on enhancing qualified competencies through the promotion of international collaborations between Saudi universities and foreign universities. Finally, the closure of the program contributes to the focus on providing advanced graduate programs or professional certificates, which can enhance graduates' efficiency and identify the specializations required in the labor market. This result is consistent with the KSA's Vision 2030, which requires the comprehensive integration of students with disabilities by achieving the strategic goal of developing education at all levels. In addition, Al-Dawoud (2024) and Al-Zahrani and Arafa (2021) stressed the need to renew the policy of preparing, qualifying, and developing teachers to enhance the ability of the education system to meet the requirements of development and the needs of the labor market to keep pace with the comprehensive technological and knowledge revolution. Madhesh (2023) also highlighted that the KSA prioritizes the implementation of integrated services to support individual educational programs, which learners must access to enhance the quality of private education.

The study's findings, which were derived from an analysis of the issues arising from the discontinuation of the Bachelor's program in Special Education, suggest several solutions: The first step involves resuming admissions for the bachelor's degree in special education, addressing past issues, and creating modern specializations at the bachelor's level that meet the demands of the present labor market. Regulating the admission of students into the special education sector, allocating tracks to

universities based on the geographical distribution of the KSA, and determining the number of tracks at each institution in accordance with labor market demands is essential. This outcome aligns with the data gathered from international university websites in [Supplementary Table 5](#), indicating that 40% of universities continue to offer a Bachelor of Special Education program in their departments.

Participants also proposed the formation of community collaborations between the Special Education Department and various KSA sectors and ministries, including the Ministry of Health and Human Resources and the Ministry of Development, to enhance the education of professionals in the field of special education. Participants proposed consolidating the special education major with other majors within the College of Education to create a unified major encompassing discipline such as psychology, early childhood education, and sociology, along with curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Special education majors should also incorporate fundamental prerequisites from other bachelor's degree programs. Participants proposed that university special education departments should function as autonomous entities, making independent choices separate from the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, the participants proposed the establishment of short certificate programs or specialized education diplomas to provide general educators with the necessary skills to interact with students with and without disabilities, provided that universities, not the ministry, oversee these programs. On the other hand, the results of the analysis of data from international university websites showed that 55% of universities integrate special education with psychology, early childhood, and educational leadership. They focus on primary teacher training for PWD and offer short certificate programs and training courses for professionals. Coates et al. (2020) confirm this, noting that special education teachers in the UK complete a 1-year postgraduate program, while their counterparts in the US, Australia, and Canada pursue a 4- to 5-year bachelor's degree in education, which includes specific courses on PWD and inclusion. On the other hand, Nash and Norwich (2010) critically analyzed 1-year special education teacher training programs in the UK and concluded that program brevity does not adequately address special needs education and placement, thus negatively impacting the quality of teacher preparation.

In addition, the site's analysis results indicated that 95% of universities offer independent graduate programs in special education, concentrating on visual impairment, autism, applied behavioral sciences, technology, educational leadership, and other contemporary master's and doctoral programs. This is in accordance with Al-Jathami's (2022) research, which determined that special education was of superior quality for teachers with postgraduate degrees in KSA compared to those with bachelor's degrees. Feng and Sass (2013) also reported that special education instructors who had completed postgraduate degrees were more effective in enhancing the academic performance of students with disabilities. These results underscore the knowledge disparities that exist between various academic qualifications, as higher achievement results in superior outcomes. Postgraduate studies may be the sole avenue for special education instructors to

further their knowledge after withdrawing from a bachelor's degree program.

Finally, the results of the study summarized the similarities and differences between the Bachelor of Special Education programs in international universities such as America, Canada, Britain, China, and Australia and the programs available in the universities of the KSA. The similarity between the Bachelor of Special Education programs in international universities such as America, Canada, Britain, China, and Australia and the programs offered in the KSA lies in the existence of postgraduate programs, such as master's and doctorate programs for special education tracks. These programs focus on areas such as visual impairment, autism, applied behavioral sciences, technology, educational leadership, and other modern programs in the field of master's and doctorate. Furthermore, despite these similarities, only a small number of Saudi universities offer short diploma and certificate programs, which primarily focus on enhancing the effectiveness of teachers in schools and special education centers. As for the differences between the Bachelor of Special Education programs in international universities and the programs available in the universities of the KSA, the results indicated that most universities still maintain the Bachelor of Special Education program, unlike the universities of the KSA, which closed the program. Due to the high number of graduates compared to non-labor market jobs, the program closed. Therefore, decision-makers need to reexamine and update the decision regarding the bachelor's program in special education to improve the quality of education and outcomes. Another difference lies in the fact that most international universities integrate the special education major with other educational majors, such as psychology, early childhood, educational leadership, and curricula, with a primary stage focus. In contrast, the universities of the KSA do not integrate special education with other majors, sectors, or ministries. The goal of integrating the special education major with other majors is to enable teachers to deal with everyone, whether children with or without disabilities.

6 Suggestions for future studies and limitations

The closure of bachelor's programs in special education in KSA may necessitate an analytical study to explore the underlying factors, particularly if these programs persist in other international universities. Future studies should concentrate on this topic, analyzing the needs of the KSA labor market to identify any discrepancies between the analysis of results and the increase in graduates. Also, the study suggests focusing on studying strategies to develop new programs or convert existing programs to function at the graduate level instead of the bachelor's, with the aim of improving the level of qualification in this specialty and achieving national educational goals. In addition, the current study recommends evaluating the quality and efficiency of the bachelor's program in special education after some program closures. This evaluation should be conducted from the perspectives of various samples, including special education centers, public schools, teachers, families of PWD, and various sectors of society, to understand the pros and cons of the suspension from their

perspective. On the other hand, it could be beneficial to examine the factors that motivate international universities to continue these programs by examining the experiences of other nations. This can aid in making decisions that are more tailored to the local context, thereby enhancing the educational system for PWD.

On the other hand, the study's limitations stemmed from the scarcity of comparable studies and documents related to the current topic, which complicated the process of finding relevant information. Therefore, we employed the interview method to gather comprehensive insights into the decision-making process. Additionally, a significant number of participants declined to participate in the study, citing the sensitive and confidential nature of the information and the constraints of their work schedules, which impacted the sample size and constituted one of the study's most significant obstacles.

7 Conclusion

The study addressed the impact of the suspension of bachelor's programs in special education on higher education in the KSA, focusing on the quality and level of education and training provided to students. It gathered expert opinions and identified the challenges faced by faculty members and special education departments. The study found that 65% of participants disagreed with the closure of SEBP in Saudi universities, citing its cause as being the overcrowding of graduates. However, 35% supported the closure, believing it was a positive step toward updating programs and addressing teacher efficiency issues. The decision negatively impacts services for PWD, schools, special centers, the labor market, graduates, faculty members, and the special education department. Participants suggested resuming admission, developing new specializations, controlling student admission, allocating tracks, and establishing independent institutions.

Moreover, the education sector can use the results to suggest solutions and recommendations, thereby supporting decision-making. The study is valuable to academics, education sector officials, and researchers in special education; it enhances interest in the quality and efficiency of special education programs in the KSA. It also emphasizes the importance of future research to understand the impact of society and the need for better design of study results. It positively impacts society by contributing to the preparation of qualified specialists who serve an important group and enhances the role of special education in building an integrated society. This study will also contribute to supporting PWD directly and indirectly by developing the level of education and services provided to them, which contributes to empowering them and enhancing their effective participation in society and interest in the quality and efficiency of special education programs in the KSA.

On the other hand, the study's limitations stemmed from the scarcity of comparable studies and documents related to the current topic, which complicated the process of finding relevant information. Therefore, we employed the interview method to gather comprehensive insights into the decision-making process. Additionally, a significant number of participants declined to participate in the study, citing the sensitive and confidential nature of the information and the constraints of their work schedules,

which impacted the sample size and constituted one of the study's most significant obstacles.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

King Saud University Research Ethics (KSU-HE-24-1015) reviewed and approved the studies involving human participants. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

OS: Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

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

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. QuillBot was used as a grammar checker.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1541934/full#supplementary-material>

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