



Admission Requirements for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Primary Mainstream Schools: A Comparative Study of Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Belgium

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Abstract

Admission requirements to mainstream schools for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can either promote inclusion or contribute to exclusion. Although parents in Saudi Arabia have called for improvements to these requirements in primary mainstream schools. Limited research has been conducted to address this need. Therefore, this study aims to compare admission requirements in Saudi Arabia with those of Canada and Belgium to provide suggestions for improvement. A comparative research design was employed, along with inductive thematic analysis of three official websites from the respective countries. The findings indicate that admission requirements in Saudi Arabia need improvement, particularly in terms of engaging parents and providing detailed information about the support available for students with ASD. These findings contribute to the development of educational services in Saudi Arabia for children with ASD, aligning with the initiatives of Saudi Vision 2030.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, admission requirements, primary mainstream schools, Saudi Arabia, Saudi Vision 2030.

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متطلبات القبول للطلبة ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد في مدارس الدمج الابتدائية: مقارنة بين المملكة العربية السعودية وكندا وبلجيكا

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المخلص

يمكن لمتطلبات القبول في مدارس الدمج للطلبة ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد أن تعزز دمجهم أو تساهم في استبعادهم. على الرغم من مطالبة أولياء الأمور في المملكة العربية السعودية بتحسين هذه المتطلبات في مدارس الدمج الابتدائية، إلا أن الأبحاث التي أجريت لتلبية هذه الحاجة محدودة. لذلك، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مقارنة متطلبات القبول في المملكة العربية السعودية مع تلك الموجودة في كندا وبلجيكا لتقديم اقتراحات للتحسين. تم استخدام تصميم بحث مقارن، إلى جانب تحليل موضوعي استقرائي لثلاثة مواقع إلكترونية رسمية من الدول المعنية. تشير النتائج إلى أن متطلبات القبول في المملكة العربية السعودية بحاجة إلى تحسين، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بإشراك أولياء الأمور وتوفير معلومات مفصلة حول الدعم المتاح للطلبة ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد. تساهم هذه النتائج في تطوير الخدمات التعليمية في المملكة العربية السعودية للأطفال ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد، بما يتماشى مع مبادرات رؤية السعودية 2030.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اضطراب طيف التوحد، متطلبات القبول، مدارس الدمج الابتدائية، المملكة العربية السعودية، رؤية السعودية 2030.

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أستاذ اضطراب طيف التوحد المساعد - قسم التربية الخاصة - كلية التربية - جامعة الملك سعود

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental condition and a complex disability that causes difficulties in social communication, repetitive behavior, and restricted interests (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). The challenges associated with ASD can interfere with children's learning (Alkhunini, 2025), leading these students to require special support and services (American Psychiatric Association, 2024).

Educating students with ASD should occur in the least restrictive environment, and educational placements vary according to students' needs and abilities. Some students may benefit from mainstream schools, while others may need to be educated in special schools (Li et al., 2022). Mainstream schools are important for students with ASD because these schools prepare them for integration into society by fostering values, skills, and attitudes. In addition, mainstream schools offer rich experiences, social inclusion, and higher educational goals compared to special schools, which leads to better outcomes for students with ASD (Paraskevi, 2021).

However, according to many parents, primary mainstream schools are not always easily accessible, and informal exclusion of their children has been reported (Carrera et al., 2023). In the Saudi context, Akhdar (2019) reported that families of children with mild ASD demand greater inclusion in general mainstream schools. She highlighted the need to modify the admission requirements in public mainstream schools to make them more accessible to children with ASD in Saudi Arabia. Enhancing the admission requirements for primary mainstream schools would facilitate equal access to education for these students.

This research aims to compare the admission requirements of mainstream schools for students with ASD in Saudi Arabia with those in Canada and Belgium. The purpose of this comparison is to improve the admission process for students with ASD in Saudi Arabia by highlighting the similarities and differences between these countries. The ultimate goal is to improve educational outcomes for children with ASD and increase parents' satisfaction with the educational services available to their children in Saudi Arabia.

This research aims to answer the following question:

- What are the similarities and differences in the admission requirements for primary mainstream schools for students with ASD in Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Belgium?



The educational rights of every student, including those with ASD, are protected by Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Students with ASD have the right to access inclusive, quality, and free education in their communities and to be provided with special support to help them reach their full potential (Beghin, 2021; Pellicano et al., 2018). In addition, the inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream classrooms benefits their peers by increasing awareness of ASD, reducing stigma, and encouraging positive attitudes toward acceptance and inclusion. In inclusive settings, students with ASD and their peers can learn from one another; students with ASD, in particular, benefit from social interaction and the opportunity to develop social and communication skills (Beghin, 2021; Ji et al., 2025).

Over the past 25 years, the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools has progressed in many countries in terms of legislative support and inclusive practices. However, the educational outcomes for students with ASD remain poor compared to their peers with other disabilities (Roberts & Webster, 2022). According to Pellicano et al. (2018), children with ASD are often excluded from inclusive classrooms due to societal misunderstanding of autism and failure to uphold their rights to inclusive education.

Placement decisions—whether in mainstream or special schools—can have long-term consequences, and transitions between placements are rare. Therefore, schools and parents must collaborate carefully in conducting a risk–benefit analysis (Ji et al., 2025; Kurth, 2015; Yell et al., 2020). This analysis should assess the child’s unique needs and availability of appropriate services, and identify the least restrictive environment wherein learning can take place and where the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can be implemented effectively (Kurth, 2015; Yell et al., 2020). If parents are unable to attend placement meetings, schools should enable their participation through alternative methods (Yell et al., 2020).

In Saudi Arabia, families of children with ASD have requested greater involvement in educational placement decisions (Akhḍar, 2019). They have also called for expanded services in mainstream schools, including resource room services, proper implementation of individualized education plans, the provision of assistant teachers, and more involvement in decisions regarding the educational curriculum for their children (Akhḍar, 2019).



Theoretical framework

This research is based on the theory of inclusion. This theory emphasizes that all students with disabilities have the right to attend the same classrooms as their peers. It claims that each student should have a specific educational program that meets their educational needs and is appropriate to their capabilities (Paraskevi, 2021).

Inclusive education means removing all barriers in education settings to encourage full participation and achievement. In addition, it involves understanding that all students can learn in the same school (Tiernan, 2022).

In the context of this research, admission requirements are significantly important in either encouraging or discouraging the inclusion of students with ASD, as they serve as the gateway to schools. School admission procedures are central to accessing high-quality education for all students (Prieto et al., 2023).

According to Ravet (2011), there are two different perspectives that impact the implementation of inclusion in schools and classrooms for students with ASD. These perspectives also influence perceptions and attitudes toward these students. The first perspective is "rights-based" inclusion, which advocates for the inclusion of all learners in mainstream settings and calls for an end to segregation in education. The second perspective is "needs-based" inclusion, which argues that every student with ASD has special needs requiring additional support, and that mainstream settings may not always be appropriate for these students. This perspective claims that rights-based inclusion lacks sufficient research evidence and might lead to exclusion rather than inclusion.

There is no single, coherent discussion about the inclusion of students with disabilities—specifically students with ASD. However, various understandings and disability models influence inclusive practices, such as the social model, medical model, human rights model, and biopsychosocial model of disability.

Methods

This research used a comparative design, which involves studying an issue or phenomenon in two or more countries to understand its manifestation in different settings (Bryman, 2016). In this research, the comparison was conducted across three countries—Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Belgium—to examine the admission requirements for children with ASD in primary mainstream



schools. The aim is to provide policymakers at the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia with recommendations to improve these admission requirements.

To achieve this goal, the researchers examined the official websites' texts of each country that contain information about admission requirements for students with ASD using Inductive Thematic Analysis as a qualitative data analysis method for identifying "themes". This method does not require a predetermined list of codes. Instead, it is based on generating meaningful themes directly from the coded text.

Research ethics

This research was based on information available in the public domain, which means it did not require consent from the authors or review by a research ethics board. Since this documentary analysis did not involve human participants, issues of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity are not applicable.

Sampling

Three official websites were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The following criteria were used to select the sample:

- The website must be an official website in that country.
- The website must be responsible for educational services in that country.
- The website must be the primary source of information regarding admission requirements for primary mainstream schools for students with ASD.

Data analysis and research procedure

This research followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) method for thematic analysis, which includes the following six steps:

First, reading the texts to become familiar with the data and actively considering potential codes; second, conducting initial coding; third, searching for themes; fourth, reviewing the emerging themes; fifth, naming the themes and defining each one; and sixth, producing reports/results.

The inductive thematic analysis was piloted by applying it to the official websites providing information for individuals with disabilities who cannot benefit from the educational system in Saudi Arabia and England. England was selected for comparison because its system shares some philosophical similarities and eligibility criteria with Saudi Arabia, making the comparison reasonable.



Canada and Belgium were not chosen for piloting because their systems differ in philosophy and structure; for example, they classify support programs according to age and severity of disability.

The compared websites—the Human Resource and Social Development website in Saudi Arabia and the Social Care Institute for Excellence in England—are official and primary sources of information regarding care services outside the educational system for individuals with disabilities in their respective countries.

For the piloting phase, the two websites were examined using Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps. First, an initial reading of the data was made. Second, initial codes were generated. Third, the codes were listed in a table, and their presence in each website's text was marked using a tick symbol (√) or a cross symbol (X). Fourth, sub-themes were created by grouping similar codes together, and each sub-theme was defined (Table 1). Fifth, themes were developed by combining sub-themes (Table 2). Examples from the websites' texts were also provided.

Two main themes emerged: external requirements and internal requirements. Each theme was defined in Table 2. The piloting process successfully clarified the strategy for analyzing the research data.

Table 1.

Initial codes for the piloting

No.	Websites	Human Resource and Social Development in Saudi Arabia	Social Care Institute for Excellence in England
	Codes		
1	Disability severity	√	X
2	Age	√	X
3	Nationality	√	X
4	Health condition	√	√
5	IQ	√	X
6	Employment state	√	X
7	Enrolment in other services	√	X



8	Needs assessment	X	√
9	Excluding career support	X	√
10	Residency	X	√
11	Recording eligibility	X	√
12	Advice for ineligibility	X	√
13	Policy	X	√

Note: √ = mentioned, X = Not mentioned

Table 2.

Thematic analysis for the piloting: Definitions of themes, sub-themes, codes, and example quotes

Name of theme/sub-theme	Definitions/Explanations	Codes	Example quotes
Theme one: External requirements	This theme refers to requirements and conditions beyond the individual, such as responsibilities of other institutions or access to external benefits.		
Sub-theme 1: Benefits	This sub-theme refers to any benefits that the individual gains or accesses from external bodies.	Enrolment in other services	"The beneficiary will not be accepted if he is enrolled in education or one of the government rehabilitation and training centers, as well as government housing centers" (al-Mawārid al-bashariyah wa-al-tanmiyah al-ijtimā'iyah, 2025).
Sub-theme 2: Local authority duties	This sub-theme is related to the responsibilities of local authorities in meeting admission requirements, such as conducting need assessments.	Needs assessment, Recording eligibility, Advice for ineligibility	"Local authorities must provide a record of the eligibility determination and the reasons for it" (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2025)



Sub-theme 3: Legislation	This sub-theme refers to the policies that determine eligibility for services	Policy	"The Care Act 2014 sets out local authorities' duties when assessing people's care and support needs" (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2025).
Theme two: Internal requirements	This theme refers to requirements related to the individual's condition and wellbeing, such as health and personal attributes.		
Sub-theme 1: Health state	This sub-theme includes the individual's health conditions, including disability severity.	Health condition, Disability severity	"The beneficiary must be free from psychological or behavioral disorders that pose a danger to him or others" (al-Mawārid al-bashariyah wa-al-tanmiyah al-ijtimā'iyah, 2025).
Sub-theme 2: Personal attributes	This sub-theme includes characteristics such as age, nationality, and employment state.	Age, Nationality, IQ, Employment state, Residency, Excluding career support.	"The beneficiary must be between 2 and 45 years old" (al-Mawārid al-bashariyah wa-al-tanmiyah al-ijtimā'iyah, 2025)

After conducting the piloting, the researcher used the same method to analyze the data. Tables 3 and 4 show how the data were coded.

Table 3.

Initial codes for the main inductive thematic analysis

No.	Websites	Ministry of Education (Saudi Arabia)	Government of Ontario	European Commission
	Codes			
1	Disability type	√	X	√
2	Communication skills	√	X	X
3	Services	√	√	X
4	Policy	√	√	√



No.	Websites	Ministry of Education (Saudi Arabia)	Government of Ontario	European Commission
	Codes			
5	Assessment tools	√	X	X
6	Placement	√	√	X
7	Characteristics and needs	√	X	X
8	Preparation	√	X	X
9	Age	√	X	X
10	Medical report	√	X	X
11	Diagnosis condition	√	X	X
12	Gender	√	X	X
13	Male Programs	√	X	X
14	Abilities	√	X	X
15	Health condition	√	X	X
16	Family duties	√	X	X
17	Observation	√	√	X
18	Parent involvement	√	X	√
19	Needs assessment	X	√	X
20	Meeting	X	√	X
21	IEP	X	√	X
22	Transition support	X	√	√
23	Curriculum report	X	X	√
24	Resources	X	X	√
25	Diagnosis	X	X	√
26	Learning support center	X	X	√
27	Fund	X	X	√

Note: √ = mentioned, X = Not mentioned.



Table 4.

Thematic analysis: Definitions, sub-themes, codes, and example quotes

Name of theme/sub-theme	Definitions/ Explanations	Codes	Example quotes
Theme one: External requirements	This theme includes conditions and support mechanisms external to the individual, such as learning support systems and procedural processes.		
Sub-theme 1: Support and services	Refers to the assistance provided to facilitate the inclusion process, such as funding and support programs.	Services, assessment tools, placement, preparation, male programs, observation, medical report, needs assessment, meetings, IEP, transition support, curriculum report, resources, diagnosis, learning support center, fund	"The IPRC can choose from three Regular Class support settings: Indirect Support, Resource Assistance (Elementary), and Withdrawal Assistance" (Government of Ontario, 2024).
Sub-theme 2: Legislation	Refers to policies that define eligibility and educational rights.	Policy	"Regulations for special education institutes and programs" (Wizārat al-Ta'lim, 2025).
Sub-theme 3: Parent participation	Refers to parents' involvement and their responsibilities in the inclusion process.	Family duties, parent involvement.	"The mainstream school formulates the education and support needs in consultation with the parents and the Pupil Guidance Center" (European Commission, 2025).



Name of theme/sub-theme	Definitions/ Explanations	Codes	Example quotes
Theme two: Internal requirements	This theme includes individual-level attributes such as personal characteristics and medical conditions.		
Sub-theme 1: Personal attributes	Refers to the individual's characteristics such as disability type and age.	Disability type, communication skills, characteristics and needs, age, diagnosis condition, gender, abilities, health condition.	"Providing educational and rehabilitation services for the autism group that is not combined with intellectual disability through full integration into the regular class in the regular school" (Wizārat al-Ta'lim, 2025).

Trustworthiness and validity

Only one source of data (website information) was used. This enabled the researcher to study the phenomenon (admission requirements for students with ASD in primary mainstream schools) as an outsider and as it is presented to website visitors. To promote trustworthiness and credibility, the data source was drawn from three different settings (Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Belgium), which yielded sufficient data and answered the research questions.

Brantlinger et al. (2005) identified a set of quality indicators for research that uses documentary analysis. First, the documents must be relevant to the research objectives and meaningful. In this research, the researcher used only relevant websites that met the sample criteria and aligned with the research objectives. Another quality indicator is the careful storage of documents. The researcher addressed this by downloading and saving website pages with names that reflected the content of each page to facilitate analysis. Another indicator of quality is the appropriate citation of documents. The researcher cited and referenced each source appropriately.



In terms of quality indicators for data analysis, the first is that the findings must be sorted and coded in a meaningful and systematic way. The researcher organized the analysis using clear coding steps based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis. The second indicator is including sufficient evidence from the analyzed documents. In the analysis process, the researcher provided direct and sufficient evidence from the analyzed documents, which were included in the findings section. Finally, the findings must be linked to the existing body of literature. This was achieved in the discussion section, where key findings were connected to relevant studies and the implications were highlighted.

Findings

The findings show that the three countries (Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Belgium) are similar in terms of the general themes of admission requirements, which include: "personal attributes", "support and services", "legislation", and "parents' participation". All countries also include both external and internal requirements.

The findings of this study are organized according to the following themes: "personal attributes", "support and services", "legislation", and "parents' participation".

Personal attributes

Saudi Arabia has more personal attribute requirements than the other two countries. For example, the Ministry of Education identifies the type and severity of the disability. Children with autism not combined with intellectual disability are eligible to benefit from mainstream schools: "providing educational and rehabilitation service for autism group that is not combined with intellectual disability through full integration into the regular class in the regular school" (Wizārat al-Ta'lim, 2025).

Another requirement is age. The Ministry of Education specifies that students must be 21 years old or younger to benefit from mainstream schools. In addition, there are requirements regarding student gender: male students who "reach 8 years old or complete the second grade [are] moved to the male programs" (Wizārat al-Ta'lim, 2025).

In contrast, the website of Ontario Ministry of Education in Canada indicates that there are no personal attributes specified in the admission requirements for mainstream schools for students



with ASD. In Belgium, the admission requirement is similar to Saudi Arabia in terms of the disability type: “Children/young people with an autism spectrum disorder and who do not have a mental disability” (European Commission, 2025).

Support and services

All three websites identify students’ rights in mainstream schools and the services they are entitled to. However, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia did not provide sufficient details and did not emphasize rights related to transitions between grades for students with ASD.

The Ontario Ministry of Education in Canada provides detailed information about the additional support students will receive in mainstream schools: “The IPRC can choose from three Regular Class support settings: Indirect Support, Resource Assistance (Elementary), and Withdrawal Assistance” (Government of Ontario, 2024).

The educational system in Belgium provides students with ASD an Individual Adapted Curriculum (IAC) report to ensure they benefit from the school curriculum: “Pupil can obtain an IAC report (Individual Adapted Curriculum), a report that gives access to an individual adapted curriculum” (European Commission, 2025).

Legislation

All websites refer to the policies and legislation that support admission requirements. For example, the Education Act (Government of Ontario, 2024) and regulations for special education institutes and programs (Wizārat al-Ta’līm, 2025).

Parents’ participation

The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia outlines family duties and methods of participation in their children’s education. For instance, “the family should be committed to cooperation and continuous communication with the program” (Wizārat al-Ta’līm, 2025), and families are involved in preparing, designing, implementing, and evaluating the student’s individual educational program.

This is similar to the education system in Belgium, where the European Commission’s website states: “the mainstream school formulates the education and support needs in consultation with the parents and the Pupil Guidance Center” (European Commission, 2025).



In Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Education promotes more active parent involvement. Parents attend an IPRC (Identification, Placement, and Review Committee) meeting: "Under Regulation 181/98, when a student is identified as exceptional, the IPRC will also decide placement for the student, using Toronto District School Board criteria and taking into account parents' preference" (Toronto District School Board, 2025).

Discussion

According to the theory of inclusion, all students have the right to attend an educational setting alongside their peers where their needs are met and they can learn and develop their skills (Pellicano et al., 2018). The inclusion of students with ASD in primary mainstream schools in Saudi Arabia is influenced by the Saudi culture, which segregates males and females in the education system. This segregation for students with ASD starts from the age of 8 (Wizārat al-Ta'lim, 2025). This difference distinguishes the Saudi culture from Western cultures and indicates that the admission requirements in Saudi Arabia have taken cultural considerations into account when determining these requirements. According to Almalki (2023), segregation between male and female students in the Saudi education system is based on cultural and religious norms and reinforces traditional gender roles in the community.

Another important point in the admission requirements for students with ASD in primary mainstream schools is the determination of the parents' role in the inclusion process. It was found that the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia involves parents in two ways: first, by highlighting their responsibilities toward their children, and second, by defining how families can participate and engage with the school. These findings are in line with Beghin's (2021) study, which stressed the importance of developing a clear vision among teachers, families, and support staff regarding what education should look like for children with ASD. In addition, the findings emphasize the importance of arranging meetings before the school year begins to discuss learning strategies between schools and parents. However, an area for improvement in the Saudi educational system is allowing parents to take more active roles in their children's education—for example, by engaging them in decision-making regarding school placement and curriculum modifications.



Strengths and limitations

Canada and Belgium are outstanding in terms of educating students with ASD. Therefore, this novel study compared these two countries with Saudi Arabia in terms of admission requirements to primary mainstream schools for students with ASD, to inform educational policy in Saudi Arabia. Although the sample was small, it yielded significant findings that can improve admission requirements in the Saudi context and contribute to the development of educational services for children with ASD. Additionally, the findings of this research are not generalizable to other settings. However, it opens doors for future research aimed at improving admission processes for students with ASD in primary mainstream schools worldwide.

Conclusion and future research directions

Admission requirements for primary mainstream schools for students with ASD can encourage inclusion or increase exclusion. They are significant because they serve as the gateway to schools. The findings of this research show that the admission requirements in the Saudi context are generally similar to those in Canada and Belgium. However, they differ in terms of the detailed content they provide. For example, Canada emphasizes parental involvement more strongly, while Belgium includes information about curriculum modifications. Both countries provide content about transition support. The findings suggest areas for improvement in the Saudi context, especially with regard to involving parents.

According to Saudi Vision 2030 collaboration between schools and parents is central to students' education, and more programs will be launched to enhance communication and cooperation between schools and families (Ru'yah 2030, 2025). The findings of the current research support the initiatives of Saudi Vision 2030. Future research needs to focus on studying the perspectives of specialists, teachers, and parents regarding admission requirements and their influence on including students with ASD in mainstream schools. In addition, more research is needed on other inclusion regulations in Saudi Arabia and how they influence the inclusion process.

The inclusion of students with ASD in schools is a fundamental right and a step forward toward an inclusive society where every individual has equal opportunities and rights.



Disclosure and Conflict of Interest

I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

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Data availability statement

All data were publicly available.

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