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## **THE PRESENCE OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLORING THE DIRECTION OF MALAYSIA LOCAL PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The goal of higher education in Malaysia is to meet the country's demands to produce skilled and qualified human capital. These demands require competent and globally competitive human resources and in line with the local community's culture. Therefore, the admission of students with disabilities (SWDs) to tertiary education, especially in universities, will provide equal educational opportunities with other individuals to not feel excluded from the national stream of learning. Various initiatives have been undertaken at the international and local levels. However, enrolment among SWDs is still low compared to the overall enrollment in our local universities. Along with national agendas such as the Wawasan Kemakmuran Bersama 2030 and Rancangan Malaysia Ke-12, universities are also seen to play an essential role in providing support for SWDs. This concept paper looks at the current trend of higher education in Malaysia, especially in public universities, as an education option for SWDs. Implications and recommendations for further research are also discussed in this concept paper.

**Keywords:** Higher education, public universities, student with disabilities, career

### **INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia is a country that recognizes the aspect of education for all groups, including the people with disabilities, following the *Akta OKU 2008* which states that these groups will not be exempted from the education system due to their deficiencies and disabilities (Johari & Abdul Hamid, 2021; Yusof et al., 2020). Although students with disabilities are a minority group found in institutions of higher learning, this does not mean that their needs should not be given attention (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2019a). A conducive and accessible learning environment is a key need of students with disabilities. All individuals have an equal right to a good quality of life. One of the ways in obtaining a better quality of life is through education.

*Dasar Inklusif Orang Kurang Upaya* is one of the government's initiatives to improve and upgrade the facilities and support system at the university so that they no longer have to reject the application of students with disabilities to further their studies (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2019b). Through the guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia, all 20 public universities nationwide must implement the *Dasar Inklusif Orang Kurang Upaya* and establish a Disabilities Service Unit starting the 2019/2020 student admission session. The former Malaysian

Minister of Education stated that the *Dasar Inklusif Orang Kurang Upaya* was implemented to eliminate the segregation of students with disabilities from typical students while ensuring that facilities and continuous education support systems are provided to students with disabilities who succeed in higher education.

The implementation of this policy aims to eliminate the segregation of students with disabilities from typical students (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2019b). The guidelines developed are intended to guide higher education institutions to formulate an action plan to implement the *Dasar Inklusif Orang Kurang Upaya* systematically and comprehensively. In addition, empowering people with disabilities through education is the best way to help them be independent and further contribute back to the nation and country. Thus, education cannot actually stand on its own but requires a complete ecosystem at every level. For example, from the aspect of infrastructure in residence, transportation facilities facilitate movement, personality development activities and co-curricular activities also need to be given attention.

Therefore, the service unit in each university must pay attention to the needs and aspects required by students with disabilities in each university. Through the *Dasar Inklusif Orang Kurang Upaya*, one of the main functions of the OKU Unit is to be the main reference point on disabilities issues in any matter, especially those involving facilities and provide appropriate support according to individual needs in assisting career development, managing career development programs for student with disabilities and developing development programs and complete preparation for student with disabilities before stepping into the realm of career.

### **The Presence of Student with Disabilities in Higher Education**

The average undergraduate student at a local university is among the youths. This group will go through a transition phase from life as a university student to the adulthood phase. The United Nations and World Health Organizations describe youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24. Therefore, the early phase of adulthood is usually defined as between the ages of 18 to 29 years (Arnett, 2016), a stage of life when young adults are transiting from education to career and employment. From the Malaysia perspective, *Rang Undang-Undang (RUU) Pertubuhan Belia dan Pembangunan Belia (Pindaan) 2019* states that youth's age in Malaysia is between the ages of 15 to 30 years where previously it was between the ages of 15 to 40 years.

Higher education is seen as an opportunity for individuals to improve their living standards and obtain a better quality of life. The university's role in providing graduates who are competent, innovative and meet the needs of the job market is important to ensure that graduates have the skills and knowledge of the job market. Student development is measured on outstanding academic achievement and the skills and qualities required by the industry and the job market. This role and responsibility are placed on 20 public universities in Malaysia, which accommodate 567,625 undergrad students in 2019 (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2019a). Statistics show 1234 students with disabilities in public universities (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2019a) represents only 0.24% of the total population of 513975 undergraduate students. In 2018, it showed that 1874 (0.37%) students were students with disabilities out of a total of 497562 undergraduate students.

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Universiti Malaysia Pahang
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Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia
Universiti Malaysia Sabah
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

**Table 1.** 20 Public Universities in Malaysia (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, 2019)

However, the transition phase to adulthood is difficult for a student with disabilities (Wehman et al., 2014). Findings indicate that transition out of higher education for students with disabilities is challenging on both practical and psychological levels (Vincent, 2019). It happens because young adults are gradually acquiring the skills and experience to take over the roles and responsibilities in adulthood (Arnett, 2016). The efforts made by students with disabilities may be in vain because transition and future planning can be complicated for people with disabilities. Situations become more complex where they have to cope with independent living and new routines (Heijst & Geurts, 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent et al., 2017). These demands require competent and globally competitive manpower and in line with the local community's culture.

### **National Agenda and Relevance to Student with Disabilities**

The history of the development of higher education in Malaysia is seen when the University of Malaya which operated in Kuala Lumpur in 1949, became the trigger for *Dasar Pendidikan Kebangsaan*. It is supported by national agenda where *Rancangan Malaysia Pertama (RMK-1)* until *Rancangan Malaysia Kesebelas (RMK-11)* clearly shows the emphasis on higher education is increasingly progressive in terms of quantity and quality. Based on *Rancangan Malaysia Kesembilan (RMK-9)* until *Rancangan Malaysia Kesebelas (RMK-11)*, the role of higher education in Malaysia is to achieve a developed nation by 2020 with the country needing a workforce with knowledgeable and innovative higher education skills, having high technical and professional skills and a high level of productivity (RMK 9 – RMK11) (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2021). This effort is expected to continue through the *Rancangan Malaysia Keduabelas (RMK-12)* prioritizing employment for citizens with a planned strategy by improving and expanding career guidance services and increasing employment opportunities for certain target groups, including people with disabilities.

In addition, the importance of higher education in producing knowledgeable and competent graduates in the 21st century continues to be strengthened through *Pelan Induk Pendidikan Tinggi 2015 – 2025* (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2015) in line with *Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013 – 2025* (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2013). The transformation of education can ensure that Malaysia can achieve the country's transformation. In this context, the university's role in

providing competent, innovative graduates and meet the needs of the job market is important to ensure that graduates have the skills and knowledge of the job market. The development of students will be seen to excellent academic achievement, but having the skills and qualities required by the industry and the job market, graduates with high career readiness can meet the needs of employers.

All these efforts are to apply high skills among students then need to be translated in the form of implementation at the institutional level. Career development services in university are also important in ensuring students work on high academic achievement and skill development. In other words, career development needs to be viewed holistically in addition to external factors such as current policies and economics, individual factors such as career readiness including career interest, career maturity, career self-efficacy, career choices and career decision making that contribute to graduate high skills improvement.

Besides that, with the concept of equity that underlies *Wawasan Kemakmuran Bersama 2030* (*WKB 2030*), people with disabilities are also given priority in an effort to improve their socio-economic status so that they are not left behind (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2019). The government is highly committed to upholding the rights of persons with disabilities through the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the enactment of domestic legislation through *Akta Kurang Upaya 2008*. The sustainability of the lives of persons with disabilities by improving the quality of life and well-being of persons with disabilities should be encouraged.

Among the issues highlighted by *WKB 2030* is to increase the number of skilled workforce that meets the needs of industry and higher education to form a society that cultivates lifelong learning. Efforts to develop the capabilities of the people also need to be emphasized to ensure the success of *WKB 2030*. Through *WKB 2030*, the government will look at efforts to improve the country's education structure and the system and strengthen the infrastructure and learning support system for people with special needs to ensure a more inclusive learning system (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2019).

Therefore, The *Pelan Tindakan OKU 2016-2022* (PTOKU 2016-2022) has laid out medium-term and long-term strategies (Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, 2016). But now that the year 2021 has entered, how can the aspirations set be achieved? Various Ministries and agencies have been put together in achieving this national aspiration. Through the PTOKU 2016-2022, the second strategic plan is to aim to empower the economy of the disabled. The government aims to increase the participation of people with disabilities in the open, inclusive and accessible job market to enable them to live independently and contribute to the country's development. Through this strategic thrust, it is hoped to increase employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in all employment sectors, whether public or private and increase the opportunities for persons with disabilities to be self-employed by participating in entrepreneurship and economic empowerment programs. In addition, this strategic thrust also aims to encourage the involvement of the disabled in vocational training and other employment support programs provided by government, private and non-governmental organizations.

In addition, the third strategic plan in the PTOKU 2016-2022 is to increase access of people with disabilities to education (Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, 2016). The government aims to increase the access of people with disabilities to quality and inclusive education at all levels, including lifelong education towards developing talented and high-potential human capital. It is seen in line with the *Dasar Inklusif OKU 2019* introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education.

## DISCUSSION

Career is as a direction after graduating. With current trends, including the effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the job market is also seen to be affected. The unemployment rate is seen especially among university graduates who have graduated is seen to continue to be affected with the current situation of uncertainty. In competition with other graduates, students with disabilities are seen facing various issues in their careers.

Completing higher education did not serve as a direct stepping stone for students with disabilities to get a job. For example, the study reported that young adults with autism were the least likely group to be looking for a job and took an average of 14 months to find a job (Wei et al., 2018). Besides that, many of them frequently struggle to gain competitive employment (Kirby et al., 2016). It

proves that entering the job market is a big challenge for young adults with disabilities (Hedley et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018).

Besides that, employees with disabilities are seen to face various challenges when at work. They are seen to have problems in time management, organization, communication, self-determination, and flexibility (White et al., 2016). Thus, social and behavioural factors have shown that employees with disabilities have issues at work (Chiang et al., 2013; Flower et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; Solomon, 2020), which ultimately contributes to the job loss factor (Baldwin et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2015). Thus, people with disabilities tend to be underemployed or working in positions under their formal education level and below their skill level (Hedley et al., 2017; Shattuck et al., 2012). Facing the real world of work, students with disabilities need a career transition plan to ensure their future (Jetha et al., 2019; Wehman et al., 2018).

Various initiatives and policies that have been formulated. However, the unemployment rate among the disabled seems to have no end. A gap needs to be filled so that what is dreamed through the national agenda can be realized. No use of the policy was provided but its implementation failed to translate into the expected outcome. The university needs to look at this issue more carefully because if the desire to increase the number of students in public universities throughout Malaysia will undoubtedly be stunted if the university fails to address career problems among students.

Employment is essential in ensuring people with disabilities improving well-being, quality of life, and social relationships (Flower et al., 2019; Roux et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2014). With the increased number of students with disabilities going to university (Ames et al., 2016; Ward & Webster, 2018), improving employment marketability for these groups of students in providing career transition programs should be the main agenda of the university. In ensuring job marketability among students with disabilities, the university also needs to play an important role. Apart from that, the university should also be a centre for career transition programs for these graduates as well as spend their academic sessions at the university. Studies have emphasized the need to look at the transition process of ASD after university life (Van Hees et al., 2015). Preparation is fundamental to the overall success of the transition process. Studies have found that it is daunting for young adults with disabilities not to know or grasp what their future will be like, and this causes them to become anxious about what the world of work is like (Griffiths et al., 2016).

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the national agenda, it is time for higher education in Malaysia, especially public universities, to prepare students with disabilities for the job market. Strengthen services in every university so that the students produced are truly able to meet the needs of the job market and the efforts of these students at the university are not in vain. With the existing efforts and policies in increasing the number of students in public universities, preparing students with disabilities for the job market also needs to be mobilized together. The university needs to look at the needs and support needed by students with disabilities because the ability and capability of each student are certainly different.

University must reach beyond simplistic vocational training and move toward training for a broad intellectual and social context to ensure success in the workforce. University needs relevant and current knowledge of employers' attitudes so that college personnel can prepare students with disabilities for workforce expectations. Understanding the problems faced by this group is important to provide appropriate needs and support. Issues that need to be seen are issues that haunt them regarding issues that involve their transition to adult life.

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