

# ARE MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES READY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY?

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## Abstract

This is a small ground work study that aims to give a base input to a more comprehensive investigation into the state of readiness of Malaysian public universities when it comes to taking in students with disabilities (referred to as OKUs – *Orang Kelainan Upaya* - in this paper). It is carried out by examining university websites to ascertain if OKU policies are in place. It also looks at whatever relevant write-ups relating to OKUs in universities. It has been found that general provisions on this group of people are available, but their implementation in universities, on the whole, still has a long way to go. There is also a dearth of local research on the fulfilment of the needs and requirements of OKUs in public universities, which means there is still much to do in this area.

**Keywords:** OKU, Policy, Disability

## Introduction

There are approximately two million Malaysians who have disability. The Malaysian Welfare Department, in its website, refers to those with disability as OKU (*Orang Kurang Upaya*) or literally translated as ‘Person with Less Capability’. The extended definition states that an OKU is “someone who does not have the capability to acquire fully or partially whatever is needed by a normal individual, or, someone who is unable to fully live amongst the community because of some physical or mental impediment that happened since birth or after birth”. However, the term ‘kurang’ (‘less’) has a negative connotation, and has been unofficially changed to ‘kelainan’ (‘different’) by certain quarters some years back. Hence, ‘Person with Less Capability’ is now ‘Person with Different Capability’ – maintaining the letter ‘K’ in ‘OKU’, which is now a well established acronym in Malaysian literature. The Ministry of Education acknowledges this new term, as reflected in its official National Education Statistic documents.

Reports show that OKUs enjoy access to higher education, however, the number is very small. For example, in 2013, the number is 1,572, comprising 891 female and 681 male students. This is approximately 10% of the total number enrolled, which is 14,989. A year prior, in 2012, the numbers are more or less similar, namely 1,372 OKUs (749 female, 623 male), or 9.6% of total enrolment, which is 14,261.

Ten percent is no doubt very low, and studies that probe into this fact is not found. Against this backdrop, an investigation on the state of readiness of Malaysian public universities is in order. This paper presents the preliminary findings of a ground work for the full investigation.

### **Provisions**

The rights and requirements of the OKUs are already amply covered. In 1990, the Amendment to the Building By-Laws was enacted, which marked a significant achievement of the recognition of OKUs in the country. Malaysia acknowledges the Proclamation on Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region, declared in May, 1994. Since then, a number of agencies have been founded, including the National Advisory and Consultative Council for Disabled Persons, whose job is to oversee the development of action plans that benefit the disabled. Of course, the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry (and its predecessor, the Ministry of Unity and Social Development) plays a big role in ensuring that Malaysians are cognizant to the needs of the OKUs. There are also the Persons with Disability Act (*Akta Orang Cacat* 2002), the Malaysian Standard Code of Practice for Access for Disabled Persons to Public Buildings (MS1184) (1991), the Code of Practice for Access for Disabled People Outside Buildings (MS1331) (1993), and the Special Education Regulations 2013, which spell out the requirement to pay the appropriate attention to children with speech disabilities, physical disabilities and multiple disabilities, compared to just those with visual, hearing, and learning disabilities previously. These are just a sample of a myriad of documents and organisations that look into the interest of the OKUs.

To add, there are also non-government organisations (NGOs) that are founded in this regard. For example, the Disability Research Centre helps in to look for university placement and scholarships for the deserving. Another example is the Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP), which has an impressive international network, and is quite active in fostering of the appropriate public policies for OKUs.

If the OKU provisions are sufficient, why then is the number of OKU students in Malaysian public universities quite low? Is it because they are generally not qualified to enter higher learning institutions, or are they plain disinterested? Perhaps universities are not ready to accommodate them, despite the policy of non-discrimination against them. These are questions whose answers are still not found yet.

### **The Study**

As stated earlier, this study is in essence a ground work. It serves as an input to another bigger investigation into the subject matter. It is based on a search of locally-written published materials available in the internet, in order to identify the gap in the local body of knowledge as far as OKUs and Malaysian public universities go. Websites of local universities are also examined in some detail to search for the universities' OKU-related policies. In addition, an interview with a university officer in charge of student intake is conducted to supplement the internet findings.

### **Findings**

There is a small number of articles relating to university facilities for OKUs that can be accessed just by surveying the net. However, most are news reports, websites of the

appropriate agencies and organisations, and personal blogs. In terms of academic study, there is an obvious dearth of materials. The most comprehensive article is a journal paper by Aripin & Mahmud (2010) on a study of the facilities and accessibility for OKUs in five public universities. The authors selected five university buildings on the basis of the buildings' popular use amongst students. The buildings were the library, the mosque/Islamic centre, students' centre, faculty building, and students' residential college. An assessment instrument, which comprised a checklist of items found in the MS1184 and MS1331, was developed. Accessibility scores and other useful information like impediments and danger items were noted.

Just like the finding of this author, the paper highlighted that accurate statistics of OKUs are not available. Despite frequent furore in the local media regarding the need for universities to be OKU-friendly, as well as top-down directives from the Ministry, a virtual scan of almost all local universities do not show the existence of OKU-friendly policy, at least not in their official websites. Rather, matters relating to OKU students (particularly during admission time) are handled on a case to case basis. In general, Aripin & Mahmud observed that some campus grounds are better equipped for OKUs compared to others, with younger universities having more inclination to preparing the suitable OKU fittings.

An exception is that of Universiti Malaya, who has developed quite a comprehensive policy that aims to address OKU students' needs and requirements. Contrary to the above contention that younger universities seem to have more OKU-friendly fixtures, UM, the oldest university in Malaysia, has successfully shown a commendable sensitivity towards OKUs by addressing concerns like the difficulties the students would be facing during the admission process, right down to the time the students graduate. As such, the policy covers issues such as safety, comfort, teaching-learning materials, examination concerns, assessment issues, and physical development matters. Perhaps the most fitting initiative is that of the establishment of a proper outfit to ensure that OKU interest is perpetually taken care of. There is a committee chaired by the vice chancellor, with membership comprising of the highest members of staff in the university. There are also Disability Liaison Officers in each unit who are in charge of making sure that OKU students' needs are addressed.

### **OKUs in Universiti Malaysia Perlis**

Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) does not have many OKU students. The number enrolled in 2012 is 9, while in 2013, the number increases to 10. Most of the OKU students are male (8 out of 9, 8 out of 10, respectively). Half have leg deformity.

Perhaps the reason for the small number is that UniMAP offers mainly engineering programs, and OKUs are not quite inclined towards this discipline. However, this is just an assumption, and it has not yet been verified anywhere. A brief study of the number of OKUs in other universities that offer mainly engineering programs show that OKUs do not attend these universities at all, strengthening the assumption given earlier. In fact, the OKUs in UniMAP are non-engineering students, who enrol in the university's business program.

Just like almost all the other public universities in Malaysia, UniMAP does not have a proper OKU policy. However, the intake and subsequent processes relating to its OKU students have been carried out with the greatest care and concern. For example,

because of one deaf OKU, the university invests in an audio system that tackles the requirement of the student. Another OKU student, who has been certified as having bone problems, is under the continuous monitoring of the university's health centre.

In terms of physical infrastructure, almost all buildings have ramps for the use of OKU in wheelchairs. This is in accordance to the building by-law, of which UniMAP subscribes. On why a proper policy has not been developed, the officer interviewed remarked that indeed this is a matter that warrants attention, and will be dealt with as soon as possible.

### **Way Forward**

This preliminary study has shown that while the provisions needed for universities to be more OKU-friendly are already in place, much still needs to be carried out. There should be a more forceful top-down policy from the government that requires certain action items to be taken up. To-date, workable strategies to fulfil this need is nowhere to be seen. As such, all parties concerned should be more proactive to execute and implement this critical obligation.

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