

## Disability Inclusion in Malaysian Higher Education: 7 Pertinent Questions

The UNESCO Education 2030 Framework for Action around Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Education (SDG4-Education 2030) underlines its commitment to revise education policies and make necessary efforts to help the most disadvantaged, particularly persons with disabilities (PWDs). SDG4-Education 2030 upholds the tenet that education, as a human right and a catalyst for sustainable development, can help empower PWDs with the knowledge, skills and values to live in dignity, build and transform their lives and contribute to societies. The new framework may thus be the way forward for more inclusive education.

As a signatory country to many global treaties governing inclusion and disability (notably United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006), Malaysia has over the years put in place several legal and non-legal frameworks aimed at expanding PWDs' access to education and employment. Among them are the Persons with Disabilities Act (PWDA) 2008 and Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities 2016-2022. Accessibility to higher education remains one of the most important agendas of the nation. This is evident through the formulation of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 and Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025 aimed at creating a higher education system which is holistic, accessible and inclusive for all. It should be noted that SDG4-Education 2030 was employed as a reference document in reviewing the implementation of the education blueprints. Despite the initiatives, the increase in the enrolment rate of PWDs for undergraduate programmes at Malaysian public universities was only a mere 0.12% over a five-year period (2014-2018) based on a Tracer Study by the Ministry of Education. Consequently, the Guidelines for Disability Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions was introduced in 2019 in

tandem with the Zero Reject Policy to ensure no PWDs are left behind.

### The Guidelines for Disability Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions (2019)

The main aim of the guidelines is to guarantee PWDs an equal opportunity for educational progress. Its provision clearly demonstrates the Ministry's strong commitment in ensuring that inclusive education is firmly established as the main policy imperative for mainstreaming disability in Malaysian higher education. The onus is now on universities in the country to formulate disability inclusion policies within this decade to ensure a more inclusive educational environment. The inclusion policy intends to guide decisions on the provision of inclusion and discriminatory-free environment to help PWDs in the successful pursuit of higher education. A local news portal reported that in 2019 four universities in Malaysia already had in place the University Disability Inclusion Policy in some form or other. A desk review recently found that another university has also formulated its inclusion policy. The remaining higher education institutions (HEIs) have yet to do so though at best there is some indication of the establishment of Services Unit and other wellbeing and support services for PWDs in the campus.

Although this institutional policy is long-overdue, it is still much welcome as it carries noteworthy implications for PWDs' inclusion in higher education and their eventual economic participation. The inclusion policy enables the smooth transition of PWDs who have completed their secondary special education to enjoy equal educational opportunities in HEIs. In the absence of such policy, PWDs will continue to be marginalised and that completing

secondary education will likely to spell the end of their educational journey despite their potential and desire to attend universities. A higher education qualification is reportedly a significant predictor of gainful employment in Asia and as such, without it, getting a job for PWDs will be difficult. PWDs' exclusion from employment will in turn perpetuate the relationship between poverty and disability. Evidently, higher education opportunities will empower PWDs to break away from the vicious cycle of poverty so that they can enjoy better lives.

## **Seven Pertinent Questions**

In moving forward, this article suggests that relevant questions need to be raised at different levels of disability inclusion reforms and thereafter addressed through research work so that rectifications can be effectively initiated based on research evidence. Arguably, a host of questions surrounding disability inclusion warrants attention. This article, however, highlights seven pertinent questions to spawn research ideas suitable for Malaysia's context and aspirations in mainstreaming disability inclusion in HEIs.

### ***(1) What is the current status of Disability Inclusion Policy in Malaysian HEIs?***

On the policy side, a desk review revealed the disability inclusion policies of four public universities and one private university in Malaysia. It is heartening to note that four of the inclusion policies are accessible online. However, there is no formal statistics for the number of (public and private) HEIs' responses to the clarion call to develop the policies to help PWDs. Data on reasons for non-compliance are also missing in the public domain. More importantly, there are no indications of policy enablers as well as the monitoring and evaluation aspects of the policy at the Ministry of Higher Education level. These data gaps point to some research areas worth looking into.

### ***(2) How are the development, implementation and assessment of University Disability Inclusion Policy carried out at institutional level?***

An all-encompassing policy or strategy is undoubtedly not feasible for all in any context. Similarly, disability inclusion policy is not a one size fits all for HEIs in Malaysia. Instead, the policy and practices have to be tailored to the availability (or constraints) of capabilities and resources of each university given that there are currently no

government provisions for the initiatives. The development, implementation and assessment of the inclusion policies and practices are thus of research interest.

In line with UNESCO's stand that access must be met by quality, we accede that the end goals of HEIs' disability inclusion efforts should comprise not only access and completion but also the empowerment of PWDs. Inevitably, the main focus should be on increasing their admission and retention as well as ensuring they are market-ready and can contribute to their societies when they graduate. Hence, there is a need to ascertain at the outset if there is a double approach that focuses on both the rights of PWDs and the effectiveness of the education they receive at HEIs. Another pressing question here includes whether PWDs and/or interest groups are actively participating in the process. Consistent with the slogan "nothing for us, without us", it is evident that the inclusion of PWDs in all stages of decision making is vital.

Existing research evidence suggests that access, facilities and other support mechanisms for PWDs are still lacking in Malaysian HEIs and this even includes HEIs that have disability inclusion policies. Hence, it is worthwhile to examine accessibility to the campuses and in the built environment covering a range of issues that include transportation and usability of the physical spaces such as parking lots, toilets, wheelchair routes, lifts, handle bars and ramps. In addition, has access auditing been conducted to ensure that the access and facilities subscribe to universal design principles that facilitate and promote access for PWDs? Of further interest will be individual HEIs' long-term action with regards to establishing an external access audit team that is trained to conduct access audit at buildings and facilities.

Apart from physical access, another area to look into is whether PWDs have adequate access to other support services like assistive technologies, more flexible modes of learning and student examination provisions that improve their learning experience and progression. What about socio-emotional support services from university staff, peers and community? Also, how is the dissemination of information on the availability of support mechanisms carried out and to what extent?

Another important consideration is the creation of an institutional ecosystem to build the capability and skills of academics, experienced instructors and support staff (including peer volunteers) to help



PWDs. Thus, are the training needs of academics and support staff on disability and inclusion clearly identified and addressed? Finally, are assessment, audit toolkits and robust quality assurance mechanisms developed and accordingly implemented?

### ***(3) Are the inclusion policies and practices gender-sensitive?***

For inclusion efforts to be effective, related policies and practices must be gender-sensitive given that men and women with disabilities have differing needs and lived experiences. Ignoring these salient differences will amount to disability and gender intersectionality issues which can cause complications for PWDs when seeking full inclusion. Apart from determining PWDs' needs along gender lines, efforts must also target at overcoming misconceptions and dismantling societal and environmental barriers to participation. This is particularly crucial for women with disabilities who are said to experience a three-fold daily challenges: they are women, they are PWDs and they are women with disabilities. Perhaps, disability inclusion efforts are best expended based on the notion that disability is an issue of diversity and a human rights issue, in similar fashion to the way that gender and race issues have been explored as markers of inequality. It follows that practical lessons can be drawn from gender mainstreaming efforts.

### ***(4) What is the level of stakeholders' awareness, readiness and commitment?***

There is a need to gauge the awareness level of the stakeholders about the policy and their level of readiness and commitment to embrace its implementation as well as push the agenda forward to successful completion. The question here is how prepared the various stakeholders are in regards to supporting, promoting, fostering and sustaining disability inclusion in practice.

Underpinning the above is the stakeholders' common understanding of inclusive education. Inclusion is a complex and debatable concept, with many and varied practices and definitions. The Salamanca Statement and Framework 1994 views the concept as the provision of equal opportunities in education to all students "regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions." Corbett, in the book "Theories of Inclusive Education," refers to inclusive education as "fostering a learning community which treats individuals with dignity and respect and...celebrating

differences." This definition is helpful in that it elucidates the notion that giving equal opportunity is not about treating everyone equally, but rather it is about treating individuals according to their needs so that abilities and potentials can be uplifted. For the case of Malaysia, Corbett's definition can be usefully applied when defining disability inclusion for the stakeholders.

### ***(5) How important are inclusive values and supportive cultures in disability inclusion?***

Disability inclusive values and supportive institutional cultures underpin our thinking about matters relating to disability inclusive HEIs. To realise the disability mainstreaming agenda, inclusive values as such have to be hardwired into HEIs' primary ecosystems of teaching and learning, governance structures, student support systems and infrastructures for the benefit of the university's community especially students with disabilities. A lack of shared inclusive values and supportive cultures is a key restriction that serves to perpetuate stigmatisation of and discrimination against PWDs. Given that, the role of institutional leaders in instilling, promoting and reinforcing inclusive values and supportive cultures is evidently paramount. Disability inclusive values, cultures and leadership that support diversity and inclusion as such represent important areas for future research.

Evidence strongly suggests the importance of the inclusion of disability issues in the higher education curricula (i.e., teaching and research). Thus, the recommendation is to revamp curriculum content to include disability as an issue of diversity and as a human rights issue, in similar manner in which gender and race issues have developed as critical components of HEIs curriculum. That said, whether this recommendation is plausible and feasible for Malaysian HEIs may yet be another research focus.

### ***(6) Is there an enact-espouse gap in the University Disability Inclusion Policy?***

Recent newspaper reports on PWDs' applications to university that had been unfairly denied have triggered reactions from different sectors. Disability advocacy groups including the PWDs Law Reform Group revived their call for the government to amend the country's disability act. A Malaysian government official urged the reinstatement of disability inclusion policy in HEIs, claiming that this was not an isolated case whereby HEIs reject PWDs merely on the count of their disability or lack of facilities. These recent discrimination allegations involving PWDs



raise concern of whether disparities between the espoused values and enacted practices of disability inclusion in Malaysian HEIs do exist. Examining the enactment of the disability inclusion policy at various implementation levels may shed light on any enact-espouse gaps.

While we should not overlook the evidence showing that a handful of universities have indeed made some headway in the implementation of the disability inclusion policy in regards to higher enrolments of disabled students, we cannot understate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Malaysian HEIs. Hence, it is important for future research to address plausibly new challenges and barriers (attitudinal, access and system) faced by PWDs and how universities have responded to their needs during the pandemic crisis. Whether university efforts and resources have shifted markedly in favour of pandemic issues and post-pandemic recovery over disability inclusion efforts is definitely concerning and is thus worthy of research investigation.

#### **(7) What are the outcomes of disability inclusion in HEIs thus far?**

A handful of studies in Malaysia have explored the outcomes of disability inclusion in Malaysian HEIs by examining accessibility to the built environment, support mechanisms/services and challenges of the inclusion practices. These studies reported that there is still some evidence of exclusion and discriminatory (direct and indirect) practices against PWDs. Other studies investigated the outcomes of the policy at institutional level and cited increasing enrolments of PWDs. While these findings are important in providing data on PWDs' enrolments, accessibility to the built environment and support mechanisms/services, the studies were conducted on a piecemeal fashion using varied indicators. Consequently, we may have a fragmented picture of the current status and outcomes of the policy.

That being said, future research on University Disability Inclusion Policy guided by pertinent research questions should be commissioned by the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. One obvious benefit of a country-wide study is that it will lead to a more systematic and comprehensive

examination of the policy practices and outcomes across public and private universities in the nation.

#### **Concluding Thoughts**

Disability inclusion in Malaysian HEIs will contribute to the attainment of SDG4-Education 2030 goals specifically and of other international and national policies and provisions aimed at ensuring that PWDs in the country are accorded equal educational rights as others. The policies and practices are here to stay if every stakeholder is committed to the mainstreaming disability in Malaysian higher education agenda. At the government level, we may need to adopt an inter-ministerial approach to better support PWDs throughout the process of accessing, going through and finally exiting higher education and into the labour market. Malaysian HEIs are indeed on a steep learning curve and are feeling their way forward amidst many challenges, particularly during the pandemic crisis. Therefore, it is important to continue asking pertinent questions and obtaining answers which are imperative in pushing the inclusion policy agenda forward. Answers obtained in terms of experiences (both favourable and unfavourable) of disability inclusion in HEIs can be used as solid evidences or bases for meaningful reforms to take place. Evidence-based policies and practices will in turn be instrumental in the formulation of short, medium, and long-term plans that are comprehensive, practical and realistic. These plans can help define a more robust and sustainable disability inclusive higher education agenda and an eventual legal framework on disability inclusion in Malaysian higher education. A greater access and success of PWDs in higher education and in gainful employment can hence be achieved.

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