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Public universities must be disabled-friendly in 10 years

Institutions share what steps they have taken at their campuses.

ALL public higher education institutions (IPTAs) must become completely disabled-friendly within the next decade, says Education Minister Dr Maszlee Malik.

This is part of the guidelines for the OKU (Disabled) Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions Policy that was implemented in January.

"We do not want anymore cases where students who fulfil course requirements are not accepted by higher education institutions because they are disabled, as there are no facilities to cater to them," he said during the launch of the guidelines on Thursday at the International Islamic University (IIUM).

"The reason for this inclusive education policy is to eliminate the separation of OKU students from other students," he added.

He added that Malaysia is capable of forming an inclusive culture in education that does not sideline the OKU community.

Access for the OKU to education will be done radically across the country, he said, adding that he hoped to tie the policy with the 12th Malaysia Plan.

Maszlee said it was everyone's responsibility, not just the ministry's, to ensure the OKU community's rights are always protected.

This year, Maszlee said, a special entrance stream into IPTAs was created for OKU, B40, athletes and Orang Asli.

The ministry, he added, has already implemented a Zero-Reject Policy in national schools so that no child is denied their right to education.

"The OKU Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions Policy will be carried out and given priority at all higher education institutions to ensure facilities and continuous education support systems can be given to OKU students," he said.

He said among the points touched on in the guidelines are barriers in the system that discriminate against the OKU.

An example Maszlee gave is the maximum graduation period which needs to be extended for OKU as most of them need more time to complete their studies and carry out research.

Study materials that specifically cater to those who are visually-impaired, deaf or have different learning abilities should also be provided, he said.

Infrastructure needs to be upgraded so that the community can access the facilities at the institutions.

He gave examples on the lack of ramps, lifts and narrow toilets that all need to be looked into.

Maszlee acknowledged that the ministry does not have the funds to do all these upgrades and changes.



Maszlee shares a light moment with the students and lecturers after launching the guidelines at the IIUM Cultural Centre. Prof Dzulkifli (left, second row) looks on. (Right) There is tactile paving on walkways and sidewalks throughout Sunway University.



As of now, he added, higher education institutions are using their own funds to carry out the changes.

He urged the private sector to step forward and help fund the changes needed for the benefit of the OKU community.

Maszlee said the guidelines state that all IPTA must use the policy and establish an OKU Services Unit that is separate from the Students Affairs Unit.

The OKU Services Unit will cater not just to OKU students but staff as well, he said, adding that he hopes the new unit will be placed under the vice-chancellor's office.

Although it is not compulsory for private higher education institutions (IPTAs) to follow the guidelines, Maszlee hopes they will also adopt it to increase accessibility to education for the OKU community.

So far, he added, Universiti Malaya (UM), IIUM and Universiti Sains Malaysia have implemented the policy while the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus is one of the IPTAs using the policy.

Access for all on campus

Sunway Education Group chief executive officer Elizabeth Lee said that Sunway University is disabled-friendly.

"We are also very inclusive in all sense of the word, whether it be for

our students or staff.

"My first secretary in Sunway was a paraplegic, Law King Kiew, and she helped me to ensure that the university was as disabled-friendly as possible," she said, adding that Law left to become a paralympian.

These include tactile paving on walkways and sidewalks, audio announcements and braille indications fitted in all lifts as well as wheelchair friendly ramps.

"We are definitely very supportive of education for special children. We are supporting the Cikgu Anak Istimewa Selangor by hosting the teachers' camp in Sunway from Friday until Sunday.

"A total of 100 teachers have checked in for this camp. Selangor state executive councillor Dr Siti Mariah Mahmud has been supporting this initiative," she said.

University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus provost and CEO Prof Graham Kendall said: "As a leading international university, we are committed to equality and diversity under the UK's Equality Act 2010."

"Therefore we are committed to providing equal opportunities to students and staff while aiming to attract, recruit and retain staff and students of the highest standards.

"At the University of Nottingham Malaysia, we adhere to the princi-

ples which allow us to recruit students based on the entry requirements and not based on any disability," he said.

Prof Kendall said provisions are in place to support differently-able students by the university's Wellbeing and Learning Support Services as well as disability access throughout the campus.

"Fundamentally, as a university we want to ensure that opportunities for higher education are not limited to only a selected few," he added.

IIUM rector Prof Tan Sri Dzulkifli Abdul Razak said providing OKU with the necessary support will give them access to quality education, ultimately developing both themselves and society.

"IIUM gives special attention to its OKU staff and students with its IIUM Disability Inclusion Policy," he said.

Prof Dzulkifli said IIUM had faced some financial challenges to upgrade the institution into an OKU-friendly campus, adding that it was done in stages to ensure universal access to the facilities for the students.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia deputy vice-chancellor (Student Affairs and Alumni) Prof Datuk Dr Othman Karim said the varsity supports the ministry's efforts in ensuring universities provide quality ser-

vices to its disabled students.

"UKM has long established the UKM OKU Secretariat led by our psychology counselling, disability and social work senior lecturer Dr Aizan Sofia Amin.

"I believe it's good to have these guidelines so universities know what facilities we must provide for disabled students," he said.

Prof Othman said the university will develop its OKU Secretariat into a disability unit which will look at creating a more disabled-friendly campus.

Universiti Putra Malaysia deputy vice-chancellor (Student Affairs and Alumni) Prof Dr Mohd Roslan Sulaiman said the guidelines will help disabled students to be well taken care of.

"In UPM, we have a unit that takes care of all students, including disabled students.

"We have specific residential homes for disabled students and facilities like vehicles catered for their needs such as when they need to go for lectures or back to the dorm," he said.

UM deputy vice-chancellor (Student Affairs) Prof Dr Abdul Aziz Abdul Raman said the university started its own inclusive policy from 2016.

"Speaking from our experience, what is required for this policy to be really effective is a change of mindset.

"Because what this policy does is to help us understand the needs and requirements of those with disabilities better," he said.

Prof Abdul Aziz said being inclusive is not only about the physical aspects. It includes the learning processes and experiences so that they are able to learn as well as their able bodied course mates and get jobs on graduation.

"Based on our experience, the execution of this policy, even on the physical and facility aspects, is definitely doable and manageable.

"It doesn't require an entire new building. What's needed is some adjustments and creativity from what we currently have.

"For example, making sure that they get rooms and classrooms on the ground floor and making minor renovations to existing facilities," he said.

All these can be done in stages, he said, adding that UM embraces it with open arms so that more universities will be able to facilitate disabled students just like it has.