

Enabling pathways for the disabled



Education

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Inclusive education a must: Universiti Malaya deputy vice-chancellor (Academic and International) Prof Dr Mohd Hamdi Abd Shukor, Dr Cogburn, and Yap at the roundtable talk. - Courtesy of Universiti Malaya

People with disabilities can be productive if they receive the support they need from society

ANIMATEDLY addressing his audience in sign language, deaf advocate Anthony Chong had an important point to make about the deaf community.

“We don’t call ourselves disabled ... we face a disability because of society, because they have not included us in society,” he said.

Chong was addressing the participants of the “Inclusive Education for the Global Knowledge Economy in Asean: A Focus on Malaysia” held in Kuala Lumpur last week.

Organised by the Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP) and Universiti Malaya (UM), the roundtable was officiated by Deputy Education Minister Datuk Mary Yap Kain Ching.

IDPP executive director Dr Derrick Cogburn explained that the institute is a network of 21 universities, including those in nine Asean countries, and was initiated by the Nippon Foundation.



Seeing the big picture: Websites compliant with screen reading software enable the blind to make use of e-services available to others. –File photo

He added that the IDPP, through the support of the Nippon Foundation, has established a fellowship programme for students interested in pursuing a career in disability and public policy.

The first batch of five fellows are expected to start their Master of Public Policy at UM's International Institute on Public Policy and Management next month.

Meanwhile, at the roundtable itself, discussions centred around the challenges faced by the disabled in being included in education.

As of April this year, there are 58,253 special needs students enrolled in Malaysian schools, with only 7,797 students in inclusive education programmes.

The increased number of disabled students in mainstream schools may be due to the Education (Special Education) Regulations 2013, which replaced the previous 1997 regulations.

The new regulations now include children with speech disabilities, physical disabilities and multiple disabilities, compared to just those with visual, hearing, and learning disabilities previously.

The biggest change in the law however, is the removal of the term “educable” — a contentious term for many parents and disabled rights groups as it implies that some children cannot be educated.

Ministry officials present shared that they aim to equip all teachers with skills to teach disabled students, and all schools are scheduled to have disabled-friendly facilities by 2020.

The ministry’s Special Education Division’s Micro Planning Unit head Susilah Ahmad said all schools should have four basic disabled-friendly facilities, namely wheelchair ramps, railings for the vision-impaired, as well as disabled-friendly parking lots and toilets.

“As of 2012, 146 schools have been provided with these facilities, and last year we provided these to five other schools.

“This year we plan to have (such facilities) for 15 schools,” she said.

With over 10,000 schools in the country, this is an ambitious goal to fulfil in such a short time.

Doing it themselves

Mohd Farhan Kamarzaman of the Deaf and Media Technology Association spoke of his team’s efforts in making news and information accessible to the deaf community.

“Many of the deaf in Malaysia are not good at reading because of the lack of (proper) education received in school.

“So they tend to be behind on news or information disseminated by the government, like the national budget for instance,” he said, through a sign language interpreter.



Crusader for the disabled: Bathmavathi says there needs to be more coordination between ministries to ensure policies for the disabled are properly implemented. –File photo

He said the association also worked with deaf students who often need help with university admissions and employment.

“I hope that more people will think of accessibility for the deaf when they upload their content online, whether it’s news or entertainment.

“For example, videos on YouTube could include captions if possible,” he added.

Meanwhile, Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB) senior ICT manager Silatul Rahim Dahman shared MAB’s efforts in assisting the vision-impaired.

“We are heavily involved in producing textbooks (in Braille and large print) for the Education Ministry and schools, and we’re working on developing a text-to-speech software for Bahasa Malaysia.

“We’re also working with the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) to evaluate the web-accessibility of 10 government portals, including those of the Education Ministry and the Inland Revenue Board.

“(Web-accessability) is a major problem; blind students can’t access the university admissions portal on their own, someone has to fill up the form on their behalf.

“We can’t pay our taxes online because screen readers can’t read the content of the website,” he said.

Silatul Rahim explained that technologies developed for the disabled could have broader benefits.

“It would cost us between RM500,000 and RM1mil to develop the text-to-speech software for Bahasa Malaysia.

“It’s been hard to secure the grant, because people tend to think that the software will only benefit a small segment of society.

“But if you think about it, the software can have other uses, like in-voice automation features for lifts and parking ticket machines,” he said in a phone interview.

Another issue voiced by many participants was that of employability.

“The sad thing today is many disabled youth in Malaysia are unemployed or underemployed,” said MDeC youth division director Sumitra Nair.

“(But) we’ve had talented people from the disabled community becoming professionals, not just in call centres or customer service, but also in fields such as communications and engineering.

“One of our partners, a local animation company, is training the hearing impaired with skills in modelling and graphic design; and they are extremely talented because they’re focused and highly observant of their environment.

“This company is now expanding to set up an academy to train other disabled youth to prepare them for the creative multimedia sector,” she said.



Easy mobility: Basic disabled-friendly facilities such as wheelchair ramps are crucial in ensuring all students are able to pursue an education. –File photo

Some participants however warned against the simplistic checklist approach in addressing the needs of the disabled community.

Bathmavathi Krishnan echoed this sentiment; she was sworn in as a senator in Dewan Negara last year to provide such representation for the disabled community.

Bathmavathi said that a major obstacle with policies for the disabled is the lack of coordination between ministries.

“There is good work being done by various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies, but no one is really overseeing the big picture.

“Or we have policies that look good on paper, but lack mechanisms to ensure that they are properly implemented.

“In terms of ICT, I think the NGOs are far more advanced in their knowledge of assistive technology, but it’s been hard for them to reach out to Government.

Tsukuba University of Technology, Japan Assoc Prof Dr Yutaka Osugi meanwhile, emphasised that calls for inclusivity need to be balanced with individual needs.

“It’s critical for the students to see that they have this sense of self, this self-identity and social identity,” he shared, with the help of a deaf intrepreter.

“They need to understand who they are and how that relates to the world.

“I may have a problem with my ears, but that doesn’t affect my ability to participate in society,” he said.

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