WHAT DO THE DISABLED STUDENTS NEED? A STUDY ON THE NEEDS OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN) LEARNERS IN MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 highlighted that SEN learners in Malaysia are given equal opportunity in access to education from pre-school to higher education. Nevertheless, when they enter the university, their welfare and needs are solely under the individual university. This study aims to explore and investigate the needs of the SEN learners in Malaysian public universities. Sixty-eight SEN learners who are currently pursuing their study at eight public universities in Malaysia made up the participants of this study. Three major themes emerged from the open-ended questionnaires responses namely; accessibility needs, psychosocial support needs and special facilities and services for SEN learners. Despite the small number of SEN learners as compared to mainstream learners, their inclusion into the learning environment particularly in higher education is critical. It is recommended that the administration of SEN learners in universities should be centralized under the Ministry of Higher Education so that their needs and welfare are preserved.

Keywords: Special educational needs, universities, needs

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1. Introduction

Vision 2020 was introduced by former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed in year 1991. This is the ultimate vision of Malaysia which illustrates that by the year 2020 Malaysia will become a fully developed country in all aspects. To be a developed country, education is one of the keys, therefore, the role of education in Malaysia could been seen through the agenda presented in Malaysia Plans (that is from the First Malaysia Plan 1966-1970 to the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015). The seriousness of the government in education can be seen from the introduction of a new policy known as "Pendidikan Wajib" (Compulsory Education) in 2002. Beginning January 2003, a penalty of RM5000 is to be imposed on parents who do not send their child or children to primary school (Section 29A, Education Act, (Amendment, 2002). This policy is to ensure that all Malaysians will get equal opportunity in education. This applies to both normal children and children with disabilities.

In Malaysia, persons with disabilities (PWDs) is defined as "those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society" ("Persons with Disabilities Act," 2008, p. 9). Currently, seven classifications of disabilities identified to be included under PWDs category that are 1) visually impaired, 2) hearing impaired, 3) physically disabled, 4) mentally disabled, 5) learning disabilities, 6) speech impaired and 7) multiple disabilities ("Registration of Persons with Disabilities," 2011).

PWDs have equal opportunity in access to education from pre-school to higher education as has been stated in the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008. Besides, education is one of the strategies highlighted in the Policies and Action Plans for Person with Disabilities (2007). The focus of the special education for the PWDs is on the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual development so that they can pursue their study at higher education, get a job and live independently ("Department of Special Education," 2011). This is in line with the National Education Philosophy (NEP) reinforced in the Education Act 1996.

Meanwhile, education for the special educational needs (SEN) students is under the responsibility of Ministry of Education. Three categories of the SEN students defined in Education Act 1996 include those who are visually handicapped, partially or fully deaf and suffering from the disability in learning. There are five categories of learning disabilities under the responsibilities of Ministry of Education. They are Down syndrome, mild Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), minimum mental retardation and specific learning disabilities such as Dyslexia and slow learners ("Maklumat Pendidikan Khas," 2007). Under the education system runs by the Ministry of Education, the SENs are promised of 11

years plus two extra years at the primary and secondary schools based on their needs ("Department of Special Education," 2011). The PWDs will be placed in either the Special Education schools or Special Education Integrated Programmes.

In addition, programmes offered in both Special Education Schools and Special Education Integrated Programmes are also based on the Education Act 1996 and other world declarations that are related to the persons with disabilities (PWDs) such as the World's Declaration on Education for All (1992), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), as well as Biwako Millenium Framework for Action: Towards an Inclusive, Barrier-Free and Rights-based Society for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific (2002) (MOE, 2011).

Moreover, the Ministry of Higher Education provides opportunity for the qualified SEN students particularly those who with hearing impairment to pursue their post-secondary education at selected polytechnics. At the moment, three polytechnics are offering technical education for the hearing impaired students and these include Polytechnic Ungku Omar Ipoh, Polytechnic Johor Bahru and Polytechnic Shah Alam ("Maklumat Pendidikan Khas," 2007). At these polytechnics all the fees are waived, facilities such as hostels are provided and the SEN students are to receive RM300 per month as pocket allowance.

On the other hand, when the PWDs enter the universities to further their education, their welfare and needs are solely under the individual university. Currently, the administration of the PWDs in universities is not centralized under the Ministry of Higher Education; therefore, different universities have different approaches towards the PWDs (Salmah Zainal Abidin, personal communication, May 10, 2011). In addition, the public universities' authorities reported that there is no special admission policy for the SEN students to enter to the universities (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). It has also been reported that there is no good coordination between departments and faculties within the universities involved pertaining to the admission and the welfare of the SENs (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011).

2. Problem Statement

There are only a few resources on the study conducted on SEN students in Malaysian universities. For instance, Hasnah, Mohd Hanafi, Mohd Mokhtar and Norasuzaini (2009) investigated on the supports and barriers of SEN students in one of IHLs in Malaysia. Besides, in another study, Hasnah, Tajul Arifin, Mohamad Hanafi, Mohd Mokhtar and Nur Hazwani (2010) investigated on knowledge and attitudes of normal students towards their SEN friends. Meanwhile, Norshidah and Mahani (2009) studied on the support system for the visually

impaired students in Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs) and a research by (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011) on the supports, preparation and challenges of the SEN students in IHLs.

3. Research Questions

The study thus sought to answer a single question as stated below:

- What are the needs of SEN students who are currently pursuing their study in the selected Malaysian public universities?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to explore the needs of SEN students in eight public universities in Malaysia. Hence, this valuable information will help the IHLs in improving their existing learning and physical facilities as well as supports services.

5. Research Methods

A purposive sampling method was used in this study. Sixty-eight SEN learners from eight Malaysian public universities involved voluntarily in which 36 of them are males while 32 are females. Majority of the participants are undergraduate SEN learners i.e. 53 while nine of them are currently pursuing their masters and the other six SEN learners are at diploma level.

Participants' disability categories are varied. Most of the participants in the study are blind (17 students), 12 SEN learners with hand disability, 11 wheelchair users and 10 SEN learners are partially sighted. In addition, four participants are hearing impaired, one with leg disability and one has cerebral palsy. Two SEN learners are with multiple disabilities i.e. one of them is partially sighted and deaf; and the other one without two legs and one arm. Also, there are 2 SEN learners with mobility difficulty and 8 of the participants with other disability categories.

Approval from the Ministry of Higher Education has been obtained before the researcher met the SEN learners who are currently pursuing their study in the selected universities. Then, the researcher asked the permission from the selected universities' authorities to conduct the research at their universities.

Open-ended questionnaires were distributed to elicit the needs and supports of the SEN learners in the selected Malaysian universities. Among the questions asked are as follows:

1) As SEN learner, what do you need to assist and support your study here (university)?

2) Do you have any additional information to share on your experiences as a SEN learner in the university?

The data was analyzed qualitatively. Written responses were read repetitively to draw out the needs and supports for the SEN learners in universities. Responses were coded; codes were then mapped out on a large sheet of paper. Themes we then generated from the clusters of codes. From the analysis of the SEN learners needs, three major themes emerged namely; accessibility needs, psychosocial support needs and special facilities and services for SEN learners.

6. Findings

Three major themes emerged from the SEN learners' responses on their needs that are accessibility needs, psychosocial support needs and special facilities and services for SEN learners.

6.1. Accessibility Needs

Accessibility is one of the vital elements in teaching and learning particularly in higher education.

To encourage full participation from the students (in this article, the focus is on SEN learners), providing accessibility is one of the ways. Participants urged on the improvement of the accessibility within the buildings in the university to cater their needs. This includes mobility improvement in all places within the university compound as well as providing them with barrier-free and accessible buildings and facilities.

Excerpt1

Subject 2 (Cerebral Palsy)
"University facilities need to be designed towards barrier free and accessibility for the persons with disabilities (PWDs)."

Subject 3 (Partially sighted)
"Focus should be given to the SEN students with mobility difficulties. They have to use the stairs in dealing with the lecturers and administrative staff whenever no lift is provided."

Subject 11 (Blind) and Subject 12 (Blind)

"Accessibility for the SEN students should be expanded so that the important places are reachable such as the library."

Subject 39 (Other disability)

"University should monitor whether the SEN students have the accessibility or not."

Subject 17 (Wheelchair user)

"Some faculties do not provide special lift for the SEN students. This will impede their mobility."

Participants also demanded on the additional accessibility facilities as well as improvement of the existing ones such as tactile path/track and wheelchair path in the campuses.

Excerpt 2

Subject 33 (Wheelchair user)
"Wheelchair path should be added and improved in the campus."

Subjects 9,20,21,23, 24, 26 and 29 (Blinds)
"Add and improve tactile path/track in the university areas."

Subject 35 (Wheelchair user)
"Ramps should be provided in all buildings and special toilets."

Subjects 9 (Partially sighted) and Subject 34 (Blind)
"Drains should be covered in all places in the university."

Subject 9 (Partially sighted), Subjects 27 and 29
"Traffic lights with sound should be provided around the campus."

Besides, some of participants highlighted on the access to information in the university.

Excerpt 3

Subject 35 (Wheelchair user)
"University should increase information accessibility among the SEN students."

Subject 13 (Blind)
"It is hard for me to search for references in the library."

Monitoring the accessibility in university areas is also a crucial issue to ensure that the facilities and accessibilities are preserved as suggested by Subject 21 (Blind) "Accessibility auditing should be conducted on a yearly basis to ensure that university premises are following the National or International code of practice."

6.2. Psychosocial Support Needs

Besides providing barrier-free physical facilities and accessibility for SEN learners, psychosocial support should not be left behind in order to create inclusive and SEN-friendly environment in university. As urged by Subject 2 (Cerebral Palsy) "Supports are needed from all in the university". While Subject 1 (Blind) added "Support system is vital because most of the blind enter this university due to its support system." Besides, lack of psychosocial support from the environment may down the SEN learners in university as highlighted by Subject 21 (Blind) "Surrounding environment or society causes the disabled more disable."

Based on the participants' responses, in this study psychosocial support needs are divided into three categories namely; psychosocial support needs for SEN, psychosocial support needs from university staff and psychosocial support needs from non-SEN friends.

6.2.1. Psychosocial Support Needs for SEN Learners

One of the main supports needed by SEN learners in university is counselling services.

Excerpt 4

Subject 3 (Partially sighted), Subject 30 (Hand disability), Subject 34 (Blind), Subject 43 (Wheelchair) and Subject 47 & 60 (Hand disability)
"Counselling services are needed."

It is undeniable that every university has its own Counselling Unit or Department,

however, not all SEN learners or even non-SEN learners are aware of the services offered.

Therefore, more promotions and advertisements should be done in the university on the counselling services as has been highlighted by Subject 37 (Hand disability) "I am not really in that much (counselling services), but counselling just needs more promotion. Less people go to the Counselling Department here because they thought it is useless and people tend to keep stuff to themselves."

In addition, Subject 3 (Partially sighted) urged "Counselling Department should search the SEN students and approach them."

Participants also requested for special programmes for them such as briefing on the campus climate.

Excerpt 5

Subject 5 (Hand disability)
"Briefing should be done for SEN on the campus environments."

Subject 64 (Wheelchair user)
"I think there should be a program such as preparation to go to university especially for the disabled so that they can familiarize themselves with the university environment. As a result, they will become more confident to overcome any challenges ahead." Subject 53 (Wheelchair user)
"If the university conducted SPECIAL PROGRAMMES for SEN learners, we (SEN learners) will get to know closely our community (SEN community)."

Besides, special motivational and career talks are also among the needs of the SEN learners in the university. These could be seen from the excerpt below:

Excerpt 6

Subject 7 (Partially sighted)
"Among the support services should be offered are motivational talks to boost up their self-confidence and career talks for the SEN learners."

Subject 64 (Wheelchair user)
"University support service should provide more programs such as counselling service, self-esteem workshop to make sure that disabled students are highly motivated and

comfortable to study."

Subject 38 (Partially sighted)

"More programmes should be conducted for PWDs (especially career opportunity exposure for SEN learners"

6.2.2. Psychosocial Supports from University Staff

A lot of complaints and dissatisfactions were received from the SEN learners on the treatments they received from the University staff namely lecturers and support staff. Among the complaints and dissatisfactions as in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 7

Subject 1 (Blind) and Subject 2 (Cerebral Palsy)
"Lecturers are not aware of the needs of SEN students especially from other faculties."

Subject 8 (Other disability)
"I really hope that staff (academic and support) always will be helping me so that I could maintain my academic

performance."

Subject 31 (Hearing impaired)
"They (University staff) are unable to understand and interact well with me." "Lecturers should understand my needs in classroom."

"A few lecturers are not happy with the presence of the sign language interpreter with me in class."

Subject 36 (Hearing impaired) and Subject 39 (Other disability)
"The University staff should understand the needs of SEN learners."

Therefore, the participants urged on the special awareness programs to be conducted for the University staff. This is obviously can be seen from the excerpt below:

Excerpt 8

Subject 1 (Blind)

"Exposure should be given to the lecturers."

Subject 2 (Cerebral palsy)

"Exposure should be given to the lecturers."

"Awareness programs such as Disability and Equality Training (DET) should be conducted."

Subject 5 (Hand disability)

"Special awareness programs for the staff should be conducted on how to interact and handle the SEN."

6.2.3. Psychosocial Supports from Non-SEN friends

As has been discussed before, SEN learners reported on the lack of awareness among the University staff in dealing with them. The same situation is also happening with their non-SEN friends.

Though participants reported their relationship with non-SEN friends is good, but still some of the non-SEN students do not know how to interact with them. In addition, some SEN learners received negative treatments from their non-SEN friends. Their disappointments and dissatisfactions are highlighted in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 9

Subject 64 (Wheelchair user)

"Good relationship, but need some sort of awareness campaign to make the university community aware of our existence."

Subject 9 (Partially sighted)

"Able students should be more friendly with SEN students."

Subject 18 (Blind)

"Non-SEN friends should give us (SEN students) chances to join them in programmes and activities held by residential college, faculty and university."

Subject 49 (Wheelchair user)

"There are a few non-SEN friends who humiliate and alienate the SEN students."

"A few non-SEN students are not welcoming SEN students. They humiliated us (SEN students) in the bus and in public areas. There are also a few of them (non-SEN students) disgraced the SEN students through Facebook."

Thus, one of the ways to reduce these problems is through special programmes such as awareness programme for the non-SEN students.

Excerpt 10

Subject 4 (Partially sighted)
"Special programmes, fieldtrips, activities should be organized so that the SEN students and the able students could interact comfortably."

Subject 7 (Partially sighted)
"Special awareness programmes should be conducted so that the able students know how to help and interact with the SEN students."

6.3. Special Facilities and Services for SEN Learners

From the study done, it was found that some special facilities and services should be provided for the SEN learners in Malaysian universities.

The research participants insisted on the improvement and additional SEN facilities in the university as has been highlighted by Subject 19, 27, and 29 (Blinds) and Subject 52 (Hand disability). Subject 13 (Blind) also requested "Provide more special facilities and services for the SEN like me". Besides, by improving and adding more special facilities and services it will create conducive learning environment for all. Hence, this will attract more SEN learners to further their studies in the particular university as has been stressed by Subject 56 (Wheelchair user) "If one university has complete SEN facilities, it will make PWDs more confident to study there."

Among the basic SEN facilities that all universities should have are listed in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Basic Facilities for SEN Learners

	Categories of Disability								
	Wheel-chair user	Blind	Partially sighted	Hearing	Cerebral Palsy	Multiple	Hand	Leg Mobility	Others
Ramps & handle bars		√	√		√		√		
Special parking lot	√				√				
Special lift	√	√	√		√	√		√	√	√
Special toilet	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Special traffic light with sound and vibration		√	√	√					
Braille path/track		√	√						
Wheelchair path	√								

Besides, SEN sport facilities are also requested by the SEN learners. This has been stressed by Subject 48 (Partially sighted) "SEN students should get equal sport facilities as the normal students do. Most of the SEN students not only have been isolated in teaching and learning but also in sport activities."

On the other hand, there is also a need to have a special space for prayer (for SEN Muslims) as has been highlighted by Subject 51 (Multiple disabilities) "I need special space in the prayer room so that I could perform prayer comfortably."

Meanwhile, special teaching and learning facilities and technologies for SEN students have also been emphasized particularly by four disability categories i.e., blind, partially sighted, hearing impaired and Cerebral Palsy. Details on the teaching and learning facilities and technologies needed as listed in the Table 2.

Table 2. Teaching and Learning Facilities and Technologies Needed by SEN Learners

Categories of Disability				
	Blind	Partially sighted	Hearing	Cerebral Palsy
E-book	√	√		
Braille notes	√	√		
Magnifier		√		
Braille textbooks	√			
Good audio system in lecture hall	√	√		
Voice recorder	√			
Braille embosser and papers	√			
Talking calculator	√			
Notes in audio	√			
Special software	√	√	√	√
Softcopy handouts	√	√		
Computer	√	√	√	√
Professional Interpreters			√	

In addition, universities have also been urged by the SEN learners to provide and improvise special services for them. Some of the special services as suggested by the SEN learners are as follows:

- One stop centre that provides learning facilities for SEN learners, Special unit or department in charge of the welfare and needs of SEN learners or,
- Trained officers who are responsible in dealing with the welfare and needs of the SEN learners in the university. These include special exam officers – "The special exam officer who knows Braille is really needed in the examination hall in case if there is any corrections on the examination papers" (Subject 22, Blind). Special librarians should also be provided for the SEN learners to search for references.
- Special transportation services with special drivers so that it will help the mobility of SEN learners on campuses. Though there are a few universities which offer this service, but it could not accommodate their needs due to limited transportations and drivers available.
- Volunteer readers are crucial for SEN learners particularly for the blind.
- Volunteer readers play important roles whenever there is no Braille reference or e-book available.

7. Conclusions

The findings of this exploratory study showed that Malaysian universities should improve their existing SEN supports and facilities so that SEN- friendly environment could be materialized. Besides, psychosocial supports for SEN learners are not to be taken lightly.

Despite the small number or SEN learners as compared to mainstream learners, their inclusion into the learning environment particularly in higher education is critical. The authors recommend that more studies to be conducted in this area. It is also suggested that each universityauthority pays greater attention to help and support these learners.

It is recommended that the administration of SEN learners in universities should be centralized under the Ministry of Higher Education so that their needs and welfare are preserved.

Acknowledgements

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