

Facilities and Accessibility for the Disabled at Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study evaluates the provision of physical access for the disabled at five public universities. The main aim of the study is to ascertain the level of accessibility of five public universities' campuses. Accessibility is evaluated based on the provisions outlined in the Code of Practice for Access for Disabled People to Public Buildings (Malaysian Standard, SIRIM Berhad, 1991). An assessment instrument was developed and scored. Percentage scores and their respective means were used as indicators of accessibility levels and formed the basis of analysis. Comparisons between institutions and between buildings within campuses were carried out based on these indicators. Generally, new campuses such as the International Islamic University Malaysia are better equipped for the disabled compared to older campuses. However, overall, University Malaysia was found to be the most accessible even though it is the oldest campus among the campuses sampled. This can be attributed to the university's commitments in making necessary adjustments to cater to the needs of disabled staff and students in the campus. Various barriers and hazards were also found obstructing access for the disabled in the campuses surveyed. This is of major concern as it reflects the public's apathy towards the disabled.

Keywords: *Disable, facilities, accessibility, institutions of higher learning in Malaysia*

Introduction

The welfare of people with disabilities is the responsibility of society. The term disability summarizes a great number of different functional limitations occurring in any population of any country throughout the world. People may be disabled by physical, intellectual or sensory impairments, medical conditions or mental illness. Such impairments or illnesses may be permanent or transitory in nature. Constitutionally, persons with disabilities in Malaysia have the same rights to equality as the rest of the community in the country.

To ensure that the rights and interests of the disabled are protected, many countries around the world have already implemented various acts pertinent to this group of citizens. In the United States, The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law on July 26, 1990. The act states its purpose as a clear and comprehensive mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities. In compliance with the ADA, all educational institutions in the United States are required to provide disability services for their disabled students and staff. Among the services provided are financial aids, educational aides (note takers, readers, scribes, and research assistants), on-campus mobility and counseling services.

Malaysia's commitment at improving the quality of life among the disabled population was ensured through the signing of the Proclamation on Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region on 16 May 1994 (ESCAP, 2000). At the same time, Malaysia has a National and Advisory and Consultative Council for Disabled Persons, which forms technical groups to draw up plans of action. The Ministry of National Unity and Social Development is playing a very active role in coordinating the planning and implementation of various programmes for the well-being of people with disabilities in Malaysia. Currently, there are approximately two million people with disabilities in Malaysia (Swasta juga disaran ambil pekerja OKU, March 2003).

Various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also actively involved in the efforts to improve the well-being of the disabled. One example is the Disability Research Center (DRC), founded in July 1996 by Professor Wan Ahmad Wan Omar. One of its various services is educational consultancy service to the disabled through University placements and sourcing of scholarships locally as well as internationally (DRC, 2002).

Currently, there is no specific legislation to ensure and protect the rights of disabled persons in education. However, the Persons with Disabilities Act is being formulated which seeks to prohibit abuse, neglect and discrimination against them (Akta Orang Cacat, 2002). One of the provisions made for education states that all relevant authorities are responsible for the removal of architectural barriers from schools and colleges. The only legislative provisions for the disabled which is indirectly related to educational opportunities are found in the Uniform Building By-Laws, 1984 (revised in 1990) under the Street, Drainage and Building Act

1974. The Malaysian Standard Code of Practice for Access for Disabled Persons to Public Buildings (MS 1184), 1991, has been accepted by the government, making it mandatory for all buildings to have facilities and amenities, which are accessible and usable, by the disabled. The Code provides guidelines on the essential provisions that need to be incorporated in buildings to ensure convenience and usability by disabled people. Code of Practice for Access for Disabled People Outside Buildings (MS 1331), 1993, has also been implemented.

Background and Objectives

The number of disabled students in higher education in Malaysia is relatively very small. For the academic year 2001/2002, there were 58 disabled students enrolled at the University of Malaya (UM) and 267 at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) (Mohd. Afnizam, 2001). Not all of these students are physically or visually impaired. However, accurate statistics on disabled students and their disabilities are not readily available. Even though Malaysian universities have been urged to provide support services for disabled students to help them learn to be independent (Malaysian universities must become disabled-friendly, March 2002), no information is currently available on strategies formulated by universities to address this issue.

Admissions of disabled students are also done on a case-by-case basis. The most recent case of Nik Nor Ermiza Rozana Mustaffa attracted a lot of attention (Kementerian jamin sedia kerja kepada Nor Ermiza, July 2002) from the mass media, the authorities and the public. The physically disabled student, who did well in her Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia examination, had to reject the offer to pursue a degree course in Syariah Law at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) due to the inability of the university to guarantee suitable facilities to cater to her needs. After receiving attention from various quarters, including the Minister of National Unity and Social Development and UM, the administrator of UIIM made a promise to accommodate her and would see to it that her needs would be attended to. Similar cases have surfaced over the years and most were dealt with appropriately by the relevant authorities. However, other cases, which are not highlighted by the mass media, would not have received similar attention.

Realizing that more information is needed in order to understand problems and challenges faced by disabled persons seeking further education, this study is deemed timely. The main aim of this study is to ascertain the extent to which university campuses are accessible to people with disabilities. Specifically this study conducted on-site audits at selected universities for the purpose of:

1. Assessing the extent to which individual campus are accessible to and appropriate for disabled people in compliance with the legislation; and
2. Identifying recommendations to enable universities to make necessary changes to effectively meet legislative requirements

Services for the Disabled at Institutions of Higher Learning

An institution of higher learning should play a major role in ensuring that appropriate support services and facilities are provided to students with disabilities or chronic medical conditions to help them achieve their higher education goals. A study by Pfeiffer and Schein (2001) found that only 37% of all American campuses were fully accessible, while the rest have partial or limited accessibilities. Among the major accessibility problems mentioned were lack of accessibility in bathrooms, recreation areas, and classrooms lack of signage, lack of emergency evacuation equipment, lack of ramps and curb cuts. Other studies (Berliss, 1991; Burgstahler, 1994; Izzo et al., 2001) also identified numerous challenges faced by students with disabilities at American universities. Similar studies are still lacking in Malaysia.

To assess the type of services currently offered by universities and colleges worldwide, a random survey of 85 web pages of universities worldwide was carried out. All of these universities have disability resources centers or similar. Assistance is provided to both students and staff with disabilities so that they are not discriminated against due to their disability in policies, procedures, and practices conducted within, or as part of, the university environment. They work closely with academic skills advisers, counselors, career advisers and health and well-being staff. In contrast, none of the 15 local universities web pages surveyed has any links or specific resources for the disabled.. Only Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has drawn up a set of strategies to address the problems of inaccessibility in the campus. These strategies were formulated during a workshop conducted in 2002 to discuss this issue.

Method

Sample

Currently, there are 18 public universities (inclusive of university colleges), 17 private universities, and more than 500 private colleges throughout Malaysia. However, this preliminary study focuses only on the public universities as it is felt that the government should lead the way in providing the necessary facilities to cater to the needs of individuals with disabilities. A sample of 5 universities was selected for this preliminary study: UM, the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), UiTM, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), and USM. From each campus, only five buildings (Table 1) were selected for assessment. Selection was based on the assumption that the need to access these buildings exceeds those of other buildings, such as the maintenance and security offices. Hence, it is only appropriate that highest

Table 1: Buildings Sampled for Assessment

Building	Rationale
1. Library	Majority of students visit the library on a daily basis for references, studying and discussion.
2. Islamic center/ Mosque	As the majority of students at public universities are Muslims, this is one of the most accessed buildings
3. Student's Center	Other than cafeterias, most students' centers also house the registration office, campus associations' offices, clinics, etc.
4. Faculty building	Lectures and faculty-based students activities are conducted within faculty buildings.
5. Student's Hostel	As disabled students have limited mobility, on-campus accommodation is the best alternative for them.

priority should be given to these buildings for any study on accessibility or disability needs analysis.

Instrumentation

The assessment instrument was developed based on the need to maximize the access to and use of buildings following the spirit of the legislation. For each building, a checklist of various items is formed based on the provisions outlined in the MS1184 and MS1331 (Appendix 1). These items were scored and aggregated accordingly to enable comparisons of accessibility between buildings and campuses. Percentage scores are then used for comparative analysis. Other than the accessibility scores, relevant information such as the type of hazards and barriers present were also recorded. This information is vital to ascertain the campus community's attitude towards the disabled.

Analysis

For each building, the total accessibility scores were converted to percentages to allow for comparative analysis. No statistical hypotheses were tested since the sample size was too small to justify such analysis. For descriptive purposes, four categories of accessibility are defined (Table 2).

Table 2: Categories of Accessibility Level

Score	Accessibility
<25	Inaccessible
25-49	Partially Accessible
50-74	Mostly accessible
75-100	Fully accessible

Results and Discussions

Figure 1 shows examples of a ramp, circulation space and a covered pathway, which are accessible and usable by the disabled. However, not many of such facilities are currently provided at the five campuses surveyed. Most of the buildings are inaccessible due to absence of ramps to supplement stairs, uncovered drains and change in floor levels which pose danger to the visually and the physically impaired persons (Figure 2). Apathy within the campus community towards the disabled is evident by the presence of various barriers at ramps entrance, along walls, in front of elevator control panels, and along corridors (Figure 3). The most common hazards found were motorcycles parked in front of ramps or on ramps, trash cans, building materials, shoes (along corridors) and potted plants.



Ramp

- The ramp size meets the standard
- Grab rails on both sides
- However, the floor finish is not satisfactory



Elevator Circulation Area

- Circulation space is spacious and clean
- No barrier



Ramp/Passage Way Leading to a Library

- Spacious
- No barrier/hazard
- Covered
- Safe

Figure 1: Examples of Accessible Facilities



Entrance to a Lecturer's Office

- Not accessible by wheel chair users
- The drain is not covered, hence dangerous especially to visually impaired
- The floor leading to the stairs is uneven



Elevator

- Not accessible to wheel chair users and pose difficulty for the visually impaired



Ablution area Outside a Mosque

- Non-covered drains
- Changing floor levels
- Not accessible

Figure 2: Examples of Inaccessible Facilities

The level of accessibility based on the percentage score is summarized and presented in Figure 4. Overall, accessibility of main buildings in the five campuses is not satisfactory. Among the five universities surveyed, only UM has a satisfactory level of overall accessibility. Within each university, the level of accessibility varies. For instance, for the UM's campus, the main library, faculty building and students' hostel surveyed, are more accessible compared to the mosque and the Student's Centre. The library in particular has undergone numerous modifications because one of the librarians is disabled and appropriate facilities have been upgraded to cater to her needs. Sadly, all of the Islamic Centers surveyed are only partially accessible. In particular, the ablution areas and praying halls are mostly inaccessible for wheelchair users due to open drains and drops. This situation needs to be looked into seriously as it is the responsibility of those concerned to ensure that the disabled are able to perform their religious obligations without difficulty.



Elevator's Entrance

- A trash can and a potted plant placed in front of the elevator's control button
- A wheel chair user or other physically disabled persons may find it difficult to reach the control button



Ramp's Entrance

- The ramp is well-built and there is no barrier along the passage way.
- Two motorcycles are parked in front of the ramp entrance causing inaccessibility to those entering and exiting



Ramp's Entrance

- A mound of sand is dumped in front of the entrance of a ramp, which is used daily by disabled staff and students.
- There is no other access for the disabled to the elevator next to the entrance

Figure 3: Examples of Apathy Towards the Disabled

Figure 4: Level of Accessibility by Building and Campus

Building	UM	IIUM	University UiTM	UUM	USM
Faculty Building					
Students' Center					
Library					
Students' Hostel					
Islamic Center					
Overall					
Ranking	1	2	3	4	5

Legend:



Fully Accessible

Mostly Accessible



Partially Accessible

Almost Inaccessible

Provisions for special toilets and parking bays have also been neglected at all campuses in this study. Toilets for the disabled are limited at libraries and administrative buildings, but not provided at students' centers and faculty buildings. Meanwhile, designated parking bays for the handicapped are not sufficient, or not provided at all. More often, these designated bays are situated too far from main entrances and furthermore no ramps are provided for access to buildings. In other words, some facilities are provided but not usable.

Summary

The provisions for people with disabilities at university campuses sampled in this study are far from sufficient. Greater awareness towards the needs of the disabled by providers of higher education is needed as they have the moral duties to provide equitable opportunities for education to all citizens. Hence, it is important that each provider has a clearly stated policy with regards to the disabled, as well as short- and long-terms strategies to implement the policy.

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APPENDIX 1: A Sample of Items used in the Assessment of Physical Accessibility

Building	Facility	Details	Score ¹	
Generic checklists for all buildings	a) Parking	• Only one space	1	
		• At least 2 spaces	1	
		• Width meets the standard – at least 3000 mm	1	
		• Signage provided	1	
		• Signage clearly visible	1	
		• No barrier to the main entrance	1	
		• Adjacent to at least one entrance	1	
		• Flat surface	1	
		b) Ramp leading to the main entrance (if necessary)	• Provided	1
			• Ramp not steeper than 1:12	1
			• Ramps width meets the standard (at least 1200 mm)	1
	• Starting point is less than 150 mm high		1	
	• A rest area every 6 meter		1	
	• A kerb not less than 100 mm high provided on the open side		1	
	• No obstruction(s) along the path		1	
	• Non-slip finish		1	
	c) Handrails		• Available only one side	1
			• Available both sides	2
		• Height above the path is between 840 mm and 875 mm	1	
		• Handrail grip between 40 mm and 50 mm wide	1	
		• No obstruction to the hand passage	1	
		• Continued unbroken along the passage	1	
	• Fixed between 50 mm and 100 mm from the adjacent wall	1		

(Continued)

Appendix 1 (Cont.)

d) Toilet facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signage easily visible • At least one special toilet each for male and female in the whole building • Grab rail provided • Accessible from by disabled persons from a main entrance, lift or other circulation space • Dimension is at least 1500 mm by 1800 mm • Non-slip floor finish 	<p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p>
e) Elevators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control buttons suitable for the visually impaired (Braille) • Control buttons are not higher than 1400 cm from the floor • No barrier in front of the control • Size of buttons not less than 20 mm • Width is at least 1800 mm by 1800 mm • Hand rail of at least 600 mm long provided 	<p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p> <p>1</p>
f) Telephones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available • Height appropriate for wheel chair users 	<p>1</p> <p>1</p>
g) Circulation space at counters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not less than 1200 mm 	<p>1</p>
Additional items for Islamic Center/ mosque/surau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No barrier to the ablution area • No barrier to the praying hall 	<p>1</p> <p>1</p>
Additional items for Faculty building where lectures are held	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chairs and tables are adjustable for disabled students • Fully accessible 	<p>1</p> <p>1</p>
Maximum possible score		42

Note: 1 If no, score = 0; If not applicable, ignore the item