

## **“IF YOU DON’T FALL INTO A DRAIN, YOU CAN’T GRADUATE!”: DISABLED MALAYSIANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Every year, we will hear or read news titles reporting the well-deserved success of many disabled youngsters entering or graduating from local universities. This paper shares a part of our cumulative work on the inclusion of disabled Malaysians in the local higher education sector from 2013 until 2017. This paper draws up from two main sources which are a series of interviews with a group of disabled university students and responses from an online survey. Findings from the interviews with a group of disabled university students uncover four main areas of inequalities in a higher learning environment, which are interaction, participation, trust, and accessibility. Based on their experience, we also discuss the relationships between the inequalities they faced with their level of stress and self-advocacy tendency. Meanwhile, data from the online survey further supports the existence of barriers in the domains of environment, the campus community, and self. The online survey also gathers our research participants' feedback on necessary actions for inclusion, both at government and university level. We conclude this paper with several systemic recommendations for consideration by the government of Malaysia, especially the ministry charged with higher education. Though we against the generalization of the research findings, we nonetheless hope the evidence put forth in this paper can serve as basic guidance for policy and strategy formulation.*

Key words: Barriers, disabled students, higher education, inclusion, inequalities.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

As prescribed by the Constitution of Malaysia, all citizens shall not be discriminated against to access education through Article 12(1)(a). Section 28(1) of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 further emphasizes the right of persons with impairment to access all levels of education and shall not be discriminated based on their impairment. However, phrasing human rights in a legal text and materializing human rights aspiration in action are two different things. We find that in a higher education setting, human rights aspiration entails critical interrogation of meritocracy, different forms of institutional capacities, equality, equal access, financing, policy and strategy framework, capacity-building, educational support mechanisms, individuals needs and capabilities, and reasonable adjustments (Nasir & Efendi 2019c).

Recently, the government launches a guideline on the implementation of inclusive policy for disabled persons in higher learning institutions (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia 2019). This instrument is a good move from the government to facilitate the inclusion of persons with impairment and/or chronic illness in the higher education sector. However, inclusion cannot be achieved without reviewing and challenging the status quo in the higher learning environment as reported by an article published in The Star (Menon 2020), which hint at a bigger hegemony of disablement.

To espouse the agenda of inclusion in the higher education sector, both government and the management body in higher learning institutions must first understand the disablement experienced by disabled students and staff. The present paper highlights the findings from our cumulated work on the experience of disabled students in higher learning institutions. We begin by reviewing the statistics on disabled students' enrollment and address a few limitations uncovered. We then proceed with past literature and research methodology. We divide our findings into two main sections; interview with a group of disabled university students and results from an online survey.

### **ENROLLMENT TREND OF DISABLED MALAYSIAN IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

This section draws on the data extracted from the Higher Education Statistics from 2010 until 2016 with special attention to the enrollment of disabled persons in public universities. It is very gratifying to see a steady increase in the enrollment of disabled persons to public universities. Table 1 below shows the total number of enrollment among disabled persons.

Table 1: Enrollment of disabled students to public universities 2009-2016

Year	Total Number of Enrollment	Percentage Change
2009	979	-
2010	1115	13.9%
2011	1221	9.5%
2012	1372	12.4%
2013	1572	14.6%
2014	1742	10.8%
2015	1930	10.8%
2016	2444	26.6%

We can see a huge increase in 2016 compared to 2015, which is 514 disabled students more. Each year shows a positive percentage change. If we calculate the percentage change of 2016 compared to 2009, the percentage change is 149.6%. This enormous shift may be explained by several reasons; the increase of access among disabled persons to quality education, higher learning institutions are more open to accepting disabled students, and the advancement of technologies that support and optimize disabled students' learning experience.

Nevertheless, we notice a few limitations in the statistics provided in the Higher Education Statistics from 2010 until 2016. First, there is inconsistent and limited disaggregation of data. In the Higher Education Statistics 2010, the data is provided in total number without any disaggregation. Starting from 2011 until 2013, the data is disaggregated according to gender in public universities. Then, from 2014 until 2016, the data is disaggregated according to the category of impairment in public universities. The category of impairment used in the Higher Education Statistics 2014 until 2016 is not similar to the category of impairment recognized by the Department of Social Welfare. There are seven categories of impairment recognized in Malaysia; physical impairment, visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, learning disabilities, mental health problems, and multiple impairments. But, the Higher Education Statistics use hearing impairment, speech impairment, leg-related impairment, arm-related impairment, paralyzed, blind, and others. 'Others' here can mean learning disabilities, mental health problems, and other categories of impairment.

Nitpicking several visible subcategories of impairment and dismissing other subcategories may hinder the assessment, development, and distribution of appropriate provisions to the targeted groups. The data collection should instead collect and present all subcategories of impairment and following the categories of impairment (including its subcategories) as determined by the Department of Social Welfare. This also shows that the statisticians and officers charged with the data collection on higher education lack the awareness about invisible impairments.

There is also a need for more complex disaggregation of data. Besides disaggregation according to gender and category of impairment in public universities, we also require data such as level of studies, the field of studies, and age. With this information, policymakers can be better informed in allocating sufficient funding and enact effective policies to meet present needs and plan for future trajectories.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Past literature review exposes various forms of barriers encountered by university and college students with impairment and/or chronic illness (e.g. Fuller, Healey, Bradley & Hall 2004). These barriers include accessibility (Baron, Phillips & Stalker 1996; Chard & Couch 1998; Engelbrecht & de Beer 2014; Jameel 2011), economic climate (Chard & Couch 1998), attitudes (Baron, Phillips & Stalker 1996; Jameel 2011; Nasir & Efendi 2020; Nasir & Hussain 2016), failure of public policy (Baron, Phillips & Stalker 1996), lack support system (Jameel 2011), lack of training for faculty members (Leysler & Greenberger 2008), inaccessible learning materials (Nasir & Efendi 2020), and structural problems (Riddell 1998).

Previous work also discusses strategies to support disabled students such as training for course instructors (Heindel 2014), coordination between the office of disabled students affairs and the faculty members (Heindel 2014), guidance for higher learning institutions (Engelbrecht & de Beer 2014; Nasir & Efendi 2019c), and collaborative efforts with disabled students (Chard & Couch 1998). However, the interrogation and removal of barriers in the context of higher education must be driven by a clear episteme. Therefore, we push for an epistemological reform of disability which looks at disability beyond negative transactional relations (Nasir & Efendi 2020).

Disablement in the context of higher education occurs and reproduces in the interactions within and between layers of structures and institutions occupied by certain groups of actors. In the Malaysian higher education ecosystem, for instance, there is the government (usually involving the ministry of higher education), other central agencies such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency and relevant professional certification boards, and higher learning institutions. Even within the ministry and the higher learning institutions, there is the structure of administration besides the usual stakeholders – the students and the staff.

Failing to acknowledge and address the structural and systemic causes of the disablement and hyper-focusing on the individuals' barriers result in policies and initiatives that individualize disability and medicalize the support distribution (Brown & Simpson 2004; Gabel & Miskovic 2014; Riddell 1998). Though approaching the inclusion of disabled students in higher education via the framework of social justice is a good shift, the translation of the social justice approach through managerial strategies negatively

affects disabled students from poor families and those who have a more significant impairment (Riddell, Tinklin & Wilson 2005).

A study by Claiborne and colleagues (2011) find that the inclusion of students with impairments in higher education requires the scrutiny of the location of responsibilities as well as viewing inclusion beyond the humanistic notion. Inclusion, through whatever approach or framework, in our opinion should not be simply satisfied with “giving a feel-good feeling” and “putting different kinds of people in certain space”. Inclusion, therefore, requires us to understand multi-relational interactions between groups of people and their affiliated institutions in an environment as well as our relationships with non-human elements besides embracing anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal foundations of inclusion (Nasir & Efendi 2020).

The experience of campus life among students with impairment becomes more complex when analyzed through the lens of the intersectionality of identities such as impairment, race, and sexual orientation (Aquino, Alhaddab & Kim 2017; Kimball, Friedensen & Silva 2017). Because of that, student affairs professionals charged with managing and supporting disabled students must be equipped with sufficient and appropriate knowledge to navigate the diverse needs of students with various types of impairment (Vaccaro & Kimball 2017). The integration of elements such as diversity, intersectionality, inclusion, and social justice as part of the officers’ overt and covert job scope necessitates institutional shift. The institutional shift includes recognizing disabled student affairs services as an essential integral part of the campus and investing in capacity-building.

In Malaysia, we can see an increasing work that investigates the situation of students with impairments in local higher education such as experiences of barriers (Toran, Yasin, Tahar & Sujak 2009; Loh, Abdullah, Yusop, Muhamad, Chong & Chu 2012), physical accessibility (Ahmad, Rosli, Takril & Sabri 2017; Hussain & Tukiman 2016), peer perception (Toran, Muhamad, Yasin, Tahar & Hamzah 2010), support (Ismail & Ghani 2017), and uses of ICT (Song 2016). However, more critical work is needed to truly bring the inclusion of students with impairments in the higher learning ecosystem to accelerate the removal of what Griffen and Tevis (2017) referred to as ‘institutional iceberg’.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The current article presents our cumulated work in the area of disability in higher education from 2013 until 2017. We draw from two sets of data, interviews with a group of disabled university students in 2013 until 2014, and the online survey among disabled respondents in 2017. Though the data collection is not continuous, both datasets highlight vital patterns that can be used by policymakers and the government in developing relevant policies.

In 2013, the first author interviews ten disabled university students from a public university. All of them are either in their third year or final year of study at the time the interview is conducted. This group of research participants consists of five male students and five female students. Seven of them have a visual impairment, while the remaining three have a physical impairment. Besides that, seven research participants state that they are born with their impairment, whereas three research participants acquire their impairment during adolescence.

The interview sessions are conducted in Malay language and recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. For this article, we translate the quotes from our research participants to English without changing the meaning. The interview sessions are conducted based on a semi-structured interview schedule. We analyze the transcripts using thematic analysis. There are four themes; interaction, participation, trust, and accessibility. Other than these four themes, we also analyze the relationships of the students’ experience to their stress and self-advocacy. We give pseudo-name to all of our interviewees.

In 2017, we carry out an online survey to identify barriers and intervention approaches in higher education. 88 research participants take part in the survey. Of these, 47 research participants are male (53.4%) and 41 research participants are female (46.6%). With respect to the category of impairment, 32 research participants have a physical impairment (36.4%), 42 research participants have a visual impairment (47.7%), 7 research participants have a hearing impairment (8%), 6 research participants have learning disabilities (6.8%), and 1 research participant with a mental health problem (1.1%).

At the time the online survey is conducted, 8 research participants are studying at the Diploma level, 48 research participants are studying for their Bachelor's Degree, 9 research participants are pursuing a Master's Degree, 6 research participants are doctoral candidates, and 17 research participants are university alumni. In collecting our data, we combine the use of snowball technique, direct sampling, and open sampling by blasting the survey link via social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

The online survey comprises five parts: (1) respondent’s demographic information; (2) barriers in higher education; (3) knowledge relating to government policies; (4) government-level interventions; and, (5) university-level interventions. However, this article only looks at data from part 2, 4, and 5. We analyze the data using descriptive analysis such as frequency and percentage. We must emphasize that, although we draw our data from two different projects, we are not claiming that these findings represent the situation of all disabled students in the higher education sector. Hence, we must prohibit any form of generalization of the results.

## VOICES OF THE DISABLED

All ten disabled university students report having good interaction with their lecturers. Research participants share a positive experience when interacting with their lecturers which some lecturers go the extra mile in assisting disabled students. Azleen states:

“at faculty, [I am] okay with the lecturers. If [I] want to meet, [I] can email [them]. Most lecturers’ offices [are located] on the ground floor. If [I] have a problem, [I] can tell them.” (Azleen, 8 December 2013)

Adrian, at the same time, though he has a positive interaction with most of his lecturers, still finds it difficult to interact with some senior academicians.

“at faculty, I feel, [my] interaction with junior lecturers is closer and easier. Senior lecturers are harder. They seem uninterested. If junior lecturers, it’s casual. They [junior lecturers] are more caring.” (Adrian, 17 January 2014)

As to interaction with administrative staff at the faculty and the residential college, our research participants give mixed responses. Both positive and negative.

“At office [in the faculty], some [staff] are okay, some are not. When go [to the office] to submit our assignment, we need to fill up a form. Sometimes the officer asks, ‘why didn’t you bring friends?’. Even though the officer can help. Why is the officer refuse to help? Do [I] have to bring a friend everywhere and to do everything? Those helpful officers will help us. When they [the officers] see us come with our white cane, they should know we cannot fill up the [printed] form.” (Mimi, 17 January 2014)

“[I] have very limited interaction with the staff at the residential college. One time I complain about the van services. During the request, they say everything is okay. But, when the time comes, the service is poor.” (Adrian, 17 January 2014)

Mimi’s quote above outlines three important issues. The first is the need for a continuous effort to raise awareness and equip proper communication etiquette among faculty members and supporting staff when interacting with disabled students. Second, even if such training is provided, the communication etiquette must be instilled into the staff until it becomes a part of their nature. Third, the university and the faculty should proactively think about the best ways to lessen the unnecessary hurdles. For example, instead of print form, the students can fill up an online or soft copy form or just email directly to the lecturers or course instructors. Adrian, on the other hand, points at the quality of service delivery.

Some research participants also share positive encounters with supporting staff at the faculty and the residential college.

“If [I] have a problem, I contact the laboratory assistant at the ground floor. The staff is okay. [The staff is] very helpful.” (Azleen, 8 December 2013)

“The staff at the faculty already familiar with the disabled students. I always greet them when I meet them. They understand. I have no problem with the staff at the faculty.” (Halim, 30 January 2014)

“... for example some officers that want to help like a fellow charged with disabled students [at the residential college], will help to the fullest extent. Clerks at the front office are also aware. If those who are visually impaired go [to the front office], the clerk will help filling up the form.” (Aileen, 8 December 2013)

Some disabled students enjoy good relationships with their non-disabled peers, while others do face some attitudinal problems. Siti, at one time, confronts the latter:

“There were people said to me once, ‘oh, you guys can go to a camp? Aren’t you guys supposed to be treated like babies?’ (Siti, 15 January 2014)

Maybe, the statement “aren’t you guys supposed to be treated like babies” is just a bad joke. But, it hurts Siti dearly. The statement may hint either: (1) the person is genuinely making a joke; or, (2) the person has an unconscious bias towards persons with an impairment. One possible mitigation method of such bias is building a positive image of oneself as Adam affirms:

“For example, in my experience, when I ask them [non-disabled students] why they don’t talk to us, [they say] because they are afraid. They assume we [disabled students], what people call, individuals that must be treated very carefully. Must be mindful of words and actions. When we [disabled students] treat them [non-disabled students] equally, sometimes when we jibber-jabber a little bit, make jokes, then they say, ‘oh, they [disabled students] are the same [as us]’. We must start the conversation first. When we are aware of current issues, when we talk to them, we have something to talk about.” (Adam, 25 February 2014)

Hakimi also thinks building and projecting a positive image of oneself can facilitate good interpersonal relationships between disabled students and non-disabled students.

“It comes back to ourselves. We want people to think positively about us, we must make ourselves positive first in whatever we do. Only then people will see and think positively about us. If not, we won’t receive any positive perception from society.” (Hakimi, 9 December 2013)

Next, we turn to the aspect of trust. We identify two major activities on the campus that are dependent on trust; the accomplishment of assignment and holding a position in a students’ organization. Though all research participants have a positive experience with regards to the assignment completion, some note a few bad instances. Some non-disabled students refuse to share the workload with disabled teammates (Mimi, 17 January 2014), afraid to burden disabled students (Hakimi, 9 December 2013), refuse to include disabled teammates in the discussion (Siti, 15 January 2014), and do not appreciate the work or materials shared by the disabled students (Hakimi, 9 December 2013; Siti, 15 January 2014),

Four research participants have the experience of holding a position in a students’ organization besides positions in the disabled students’ association. One research participant has the experience being nominated and the rest do not hold any position outside the disabled students’ association. Disabled students just as other university students on the campus should take the opportunities to develop one’s skills and explore one’s capabilities beyond academic achievement. However, societal and personal restrictions may influence one’s participation in these activities.

“They [other students] still perceive that we cannot perform our job effectively because we have an impairment. They say, ‘He’s disabled, how can he do it?’. They say many things, I can’t do this, I can’t do that, not able to organize the program. They say it like I am unable to materialize the program because I am disabled. Because I’m disabled, the task won’t be completed perfectly.” (Hakimi, 9 December 2013)

“I’m not interested in [holding a] position, personally speaking. I am not a person who is brave to talk to an audience. Lack of confidence.” (Hasyim, 6 March 2014)

The third area of inquiry is participation. We divide participation of disabled students on the campus into two major activities; academic participation and social participation. From our exchanges with the research participants, all of them can participate in the lectures and tutorial sessions. Our research participants seem satisfied with the teaching approach and the selection of the lecture venue. Yet, some barriers still occur as Siti points out:

“Like us [the visually impaired], we need to use the recorder. Some will say, ‘recording is dangerous’. They worry we misuse [the recording]. That’s distrust among lecturers toward disabled students.” (Siti, 15 January 2014)

The presence of disabled students in a class seems to have its silver lining.

“Luckily, some lecturers aware of the problem. They say, ‘Now I understand something. I learn about new teaching methods. New teaching techniques’. They know that I’m blind, they describe what is on the slide. When a video is played, they will ask my friend, sometimes the lecturer sits at my side to describe the video.” (Halim, 13 December 2013)

Meanwhile, some research participants share their feeling of isolation when they take part in a social, cultural, or recreational activity either organized by their residential college or other parties.

“The thing that bore me, we don’t have any interaction with other people. When we sit there, other people know what is happening in front of them, sometimes when we go to these places, felt like a looser or lonely. That’s the factor causing people like us [the visually impaired] don’t want to join any programs for example at the residential college.” (Adam, 25 February 2014)

Another key area of disabled students’ experience on campus is the level of accessibility. Research participants report several major access problems such as unavailability of tactile pavements to essential locations (Halim, 13 December 2013), uncovered drains (Adam, 25 February 2014), unavailability of ramps (Adam, 25 February 2014), elevators are not equipped with the audio announcement and braille-labeled buttons (Adam, 25 February 2014), inaccessible website (Siti, 15 January 2014), no accessible format of information dissemination (Hakimi, 9 December 2013; Siti, 15 January 2014), inaccessible and unsafe walking pavement for a wheelchair user (Azleen, 8 December 2013).

Some research participants share their experience of stress due to several reasons such as difficulty in accessing reading materials (Aileen, 8 December 2013; Hakimi, 9 December 2013; Siti, 15 January 2014), difficulty in accessing a facility (Azleen, 8 December 2013), and obstacles in using support services (Noor, 30 January 2014). One research participant shares:

“Crying because [I] feel it’s very hard to live here. You know. [I] have to rely a lot on others. Felt so little. It’s hard to find a book. Everything is hard. Maybe that’s why. It may seem like a problem. Sometimes [I] think that, why must I study hard to enter U[niversity].” (Siti, 15 January 2014)

All of our research participants do not deny stress as part of the campus experience, but each of them perceives and manages stress differently. For example, Halim says:

“Usually, I will relax. Don’t do anything. Don’t focus on anything for a while. Listen to music. Spend time with friends. Joking with friends. Or go for a walk.” (Halim, 13 December 2013)

Some also use a spiritual approach to calm themselves.

“... if I have a problem, I will reflect. Pray to Allah a lot. Calm down. Quickly think about the solutions. First, I will think for myself. Then, I will share with others. I call my mother. Tell my friends.” (Siti, 30 January 2014)

Based on the conversations with the group of disabled university students, 9 out of 10 research participants feel that their experience of stress does not affect their study and social relationships. This may be explained by a couple of reasons; (1) these students have high self-esteem and a strong positive self-concept; and, (2) a network of support and care comprises of their peers and other people in their lives as mentioned by Halim and Siti above which also repeated when we discuss self-advocacy tendencies below.

Five research participants are not compelled to do self-advocacy compared to the other five research participants. A couple of reasons are cited for not doing self-advocacy such as a lack of confidence (Noor, 30 January 2014) and a lack of information (Hasyim, 6 March 2014). One research participant shares:

“Voicing out is the best thing in my opinion. But, the reason I become bored to voice out is no action taken. Maybe once or twice, I will voice out. If there is no action or the situation remains as it is, that’s enough. Not giving up. But, I had it with the same caprices.” (Adam, 25 February 2014)

In Azleen’s experience, she gains a positive outcome when she raises her problem.

“Sometimes, the lecture is done at the lecture hall located on the third floor. So, it’s difficult to access that venue. [I] voiced out, inform the lecturer, [I] can’t go upstairs. Then, they consider, they change the [lecture] venue.” (Azleen, 8 December 2013)

They use both verbal and written forms of self-advocacy. It is also very fascinating to observe a collective effort among disabled students group via their association. One research participant shares:

“[I] did ask help from others. For example, in PERMIUM [a student body for disabled students], we did solve some problems. Because we voice it out together for our rights.” (Noor, 30 January 2014)

## **FEEDBACK FROM ONLINE SURVEY**

Feedback from online respondents shows 36 respondents (40.9%) face obstacles in accessing faculty building, 34 respondents (38.6%) face barriers in residential building, and 32 respondents (36.4%) have difficulty in accessing healthcare building at their universities. These three areas are very important for students and can shape their learning experience throughout their studies. Also, 54 respondents (61.4%) claim to face difficulty accessing sport and recreational facilities, while 32 respondents (36.4%) have an access problem with regards to religious facilities. This highlights the fact many disabled students cannot meaningfully enjoy social and cultural activities on an equal basis with other students on the campus.

47.7% of the total number of respondents (equivalent to 42 research participants) also report facing barriers in transportation. The result also alarmingly shows that 51 respondents (58%) feel the campus environment is not safe for disabled students’ mobility. Coupling these two problems affect the learning experience as well as the wellbeing of disabled students. These problems may indirectly diminish the self-esteem and security of disabled students on top of other social and physical hindrances they have to face. The government and the management body of higher learning institutions must take proactive measures such as ensuring the accessible design of walking pavements, covered drainages, sufficient lighting during night time, and accessible mechanisms for emergencies.

As to the accessibility of website and online system, 31 respondents (35.2%) claim to face problem in accessing the online infrastructure. There is an increasing trend in the utilization of online learning and other online services provided by higher learning institutions. At the time this article is written, educational institutions at all levels are shifting their teaching medium from conventional face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Though technological development certainly enables disabled persons in many aspects of their lives, it can still impose hardship to disabled people if the inclusion of all types of users is not an inherent part of the design, adoption, and usage of such technologies.

Regarding the interaction between respondents and different actors in the campus, 13 respondents (14.8%) report receiving negative treatment from their lecturers, and 19 respondents (21.6%) aver that they undergo negative treatment from administrative staff. Moreover, 18 respondents (20.5%) face negative interactions with their non-disabled peers. This shows Malaysians are gradually aware and accept persons with impairment and/or chronic illness. Be that as it may, it seems more advocacy work and training must be done to truly nurture understanding and respect toward various categories of impairment and/or chronic illness.

We also ask our respondents regarding learning support. 31.8% of the total number of respondents (equivalent to 28 research participants) assert inaccessible teaching methods and 26 of them (29.5%) also point at the weakness in the support system during the final examination. On accessible learning materials, 40 respondents (45.5%) report facing obstacles in this matter. 41 respondents (46.6%) also claim to receive a lack of support during the internship, whereas 51 respondents (58%) point to the

weakness in the assistant system such as sign language interpreters, notetakers, and readers. Plus, 52 respondents (59.1%) note of a lack of support for students in conducting research.

What's more, 41 respondents (46.6%) face a monetary problem and the same number of respondents also find it difficult to purchase and maintain assistive devices. Additionally, 26 respondents (29.5%) aver that they have a motivation problem.

We are also curious about our respondents' perception towards a list of government-level and university-level interventions, whether they view such actions are needed or otherwise. 82 respondents (93.2%) feel there is a need for a policy on access, equity, support system, and empowerment of disabled persons in higher education by the government. On the other hand, 84 respondents (95.5%) feel there is a need for the same policy at the university level. The findings above show that our respondents yearn for macro-level and micro-level interventions concerning the inclusion of disabled people in higher education. Such pivotal actions dictate the other actions listed below. Another point is to build bridges between government policy and university policy so the goals are aligned.

Having policies is not enough without a body charged with the administration and the monitoring of such policies. 81 respondents (92%) feel that the ministry of higher education must establish a dedicated unit tasked with the inclusion of disabled people in higher education, while 80 respondents (90.9%) assert the need to establish the same dedicated unit at the university. The results show that our respondents also prioritize the structure of governance. Like in other contexts, there must be a structure with clear functions and officers with a set of specific skills because of the nature of disablement and the diversity of the disabled community.

The implementation of government policies necessitates a certain amount of spending. In this regard, 85 respondents (96.6%) feel that the government must allocate funding to upgrade the facilities for disabled people in higher learning institutions and 83 respondents (94.3%) assert universities should do the same. To ensure and protect the rights of disabled people in higher education, one part of the matrix is funding allocation and different stakeholders must be prepared to put in the investment (Nasir & Efendi 2019c, p. 14). Thus, we propose:

“Inclusive budgeting must be an integral part of the budgetary process by the government and higher learning institutions. Beyond that, we see there is a possibility to expand our approach to funding inclusive higher education system by promoting the roles of the private sector as well as collaborating with regional and international entities, non-governmental organizations, other funding bodies, and individuals.” (Ibid)

Finally, 78 respondents (88.6%) are in the opinion there is a need for a secretariat charged with advisory and monitoring functions concerning the inclusion of disabled people in the higher education sector. On the other hand, 77 respondents (87.5%) feel the need for a disabled student association at the university level. These findings stress the need for checks and balances as well as active participation among disabled students in the decision-making process. This may also hint at the budding critical group consciousness and advocacy preparedness among our respondents.

## DISCUSSION

Findings from the interviews and the online survey suggest that disablement in higher education can be broadly grouped into three domains; environment, the campus community, and self. The existence and interactions between these domains support the idea of the neo-biopsychosocial model of disability which argues disability caused by “... negative relationships between the dimension of self, society, and environment based on inaccurate episteme which then leads to material and abstract inequalities in their lives“ (Nasir & Efendi 2018, p. 29). For clarity, we define the aforementioned domains:

1. Environment refers to the physical (e.g. buildings and pathways) and non-physical environment (e.g. online infrastructure) as well as systems (e.g. registration procedures and student services) that are being used for different activities in a higher learning institution. This includes the geography (i.e. the location of the university or college and its geographical characteristics) and various tools (e.g. regulations, policies, ICT facilities, student aids, identification cards) used as part of daily interaction between different actors in the campus.
2. Campus community refers to different groups of actors (e.g. management body, lecturers, administrative staff, and students) and the social structure and relationships between these groups in the higher learning institution.
3. Self refers to facets of oneself or the parallel of body planes (Nasir & Efendi 2019a, 2019b) that reflects one's needs and capabilities.

We are not suggesting that barriers in these three domains exist hierarchically. Instead, they exist simultaneously and in the continuum. Each domain interacts and influences other domains. For example, obstacles such as inaccessible faculty buildings (environment) and a lack of support from lecturers (campus community) can affect one's motivation to learn (self) which may end up dropping out if the student and the university fail to find meaningful ways to remedy such situations. Some lecturers may also have negative experiences encountering some students with impairment in the past (Nasir & Hussain 2016) such as the students' personality or work ethics (self) which then the lecturers develop incorrect assumptions about other students with impairment onward (campus community).

Based on the feedback from the online survey, it is strongly suggested for the Government of Malaysia to take structural measures to the inclusion of disabled persons in the higher education sector. But, the policymaking process is influenced by factors such as prevailing public opinion, organizational culture, political goals, values and ideologies of the researchers and the policymakers, control of power, incompatible timeframes in policymaking and research, alignment with existing knowledge, and ability to change policies based on the new evidence (O'Dwyer 2004, p. II).

This means having written and published a paper with constructive recommendations will not automatically produce epistemic change and evidence-based actions. Usually, change at a macro level impacts on institutions and systems. Hence, a lot of socio-political and socio-cultural dials must be turned. This leads to the interrogation of power relations within society and power interactions between the disabled community and other institutions. Power in the context of disabled people in higher education has also been discussed by Beauchamp-Pryor (2004). We assert that the analysis of power relations and power interactions must go beyond negotiation for reasonable adjustments and consultative bodies. The analysis must also probe the usage and effects of various apparatus of institutional control.

Despite the potential of grassroots pressure groups organized by the disabled community in affecting the socio-political environment (Oliver 1990) in the forms of activism, negotiation, and building alliance (Nasir & Efendi 2019c), further research is required to investigate the episteme, the utilization, and the weight of disabled people's advocacy movement in policymaking. Critical inquiry in this matter may offer useful lessons for policy changes, not only in education, but also for other social, economic, and political issues concerning persons with impairment and/or chronic illness in Malaysia.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experiences and feedback from the research participants from the two datasets give evidence to the multi-relational interactions which cause disablement in higher education. These results strengthen the idea which disability occurs due to negative relationships between the domain of self, society, and the environment as we argued through the neo-biopsychosocial model of disability (Nasir & Efendi 2018). Drawing out from the discussion above, we propose some initial steps that should be taken by the government of Malaysia to ensure disabled people access to higher education:

- To establish a specific department or section within the Ministry of Higher Education or relevant ministry which functions as a planner, implementer, coordinator, and evaluator on issues relating to disabled people access and their condition in higher education sector;
- To practice inclusive national budgeting on higher education sector which also include the needs of disabled people in higher education, not only in terms of financial assistance and service improvement but also cover aspects such as infrastructural modification, inclusive web design, safety and so forth; and,
- To establish an educational support mechanism for disabled people in higher education through a network of ministries, higher learning institutions, support centers, and the disabled community.

We realize that we barely scratch the surface of the matter. There is no doubt more research is needed in many other topics relating and affecting the disabled community in higher education such as issues among disabled employees in this sector (academics and non-academics) and various academic cultures in place (postgraduate studies, examinations, impairment-course compatibility and so forth). We believe the COVID-19 pandemic produces the necessary motion for the higher learning institutions and the disabled community to re-examine the teaching and learning infrastructure, both physical and non-physical components.

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