

Are we doing enough?

The disabled have proven their capabilities by gaining places in public universities. However, they still face a long road strewn with challenges.



Raizan uses a motorised wheelchair on campus.



Amirul (right) helps Syed Fateh to negotiate the stairs after borrowing books from the university library.

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FOR disabled students at both public and private universities, gaining a place in university is just the beginning of the many challenges they will face.

Other than grappling with a strange, new environment, disabled students also have to work twice as hard to compete with their able-bodied coursemates.

Take the visually-impaired, for example. For them, attending lectures is not a simple affair as they have to record the lectures and transcribe them into Braille.

Finances are another consideration – disabled students generally have to spend more on their studies, to buy special equipment and additional learning resources.

Fortunately, from this year, the Higher Education Ministry has allocated an allowance of RM300 monthly for all registered disabled students in both public and private institutions.

The students must be registered with the Social Welfare Department and they must be full-time students doing diploma programmes and above.

Statistics provided by the Higher Education Ministry last year show that there were 183 registered disabled students studying at public higher education institutions.

Higher Education Management Department director-general Prof Datuk Dr Hassan Said says the figure for the 2007/2008 academic year will only be finalised next month as the Ministry is still considering appeals from disabled students.

Disabled students are spread out across all public higher education institutions.

The breakdown for last year is: Universiti Malaya (29), Universiti Putra Malaysia (10), Universiti Sains Malaysia (20), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (28), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (11), Universiti Teknologi Mara (29), Universiti Utara Malaysia (14), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (14), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (3), International Islamic University Malaysia (10), Universiti Darul Iman (5), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (6), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (2), and one each in Universiti Malaysia Pahang and Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka.

Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka.

✦ "Most of the disabled students are pursuing programmes in the social sciences and humanities" says Prof Hassan.

"As for the type of disabilities, the majority are either hearing or visually impaired, have limited mobility or suffer from cerebral palsy."

Prof Hassan admits that many universities built in the 70s and 80s were not disabled-friendly.

"It is a policy now that all buildings to be built in the Ninth Malaysia Plan must have facilities to cater to the needs of the disabled.

"Renovations and alterations are also being made to old buildings.

"Eventually, we hope that all university buildings will be disabled-friendly."

As for entry requirements into varsities, Prof Hassan says that it is government policy to admit disabled students even though their merit marks may not be as high as able-bodied students.

"They are given special consideration during the admission process.

"It is unfair to impose strict meritocracy requirements on them. Some faculties admit them, even if they have slightly lower merit points."

He adds that the Ministry is committed to providing the necessary assistance to disabled students to pursue their studies in university.

"We even allow parents to accompany their disabled children to study, and provide accommodation for them," adds Prof Hassan.

StarEducation visited some universities recently to check out how disabled-friendly they are and to see how disabled students are coping with campus life.

Learning to be independent

Muhammad Raizan Ab Rahman managed to get a place at Universiti Malaya's (UM) science preparatory centre on his second attempt.

Raizan, who is wheelchair-bound and has spina bifida, had earlier rejected an offer to study at the Education Ministry's matriculation centre in Malacca as he wanted to be closer to home. His hopes of becoming a Mathematics

on campus.

lecturer took a beating when he was unsuccessful in his initial application to gain a place at UM. Luckily, he managed to get in on his second try.

He is the first wheelchair-bound student at the science preparatory centre. According to director Assoc Prof Dr Azilah Abd Rahman, several adjustments had to be made to accommodate Raizan.

"We sourced for funds to build ramps so that he could use his wheelchair. We also managed to get Yayasan Kebajikan Negara to sponsor a motorised wheelchair for him."

Raizan, who stays in a single room on the ground floor of the nearby Twelfth Residential College, wheels himself to class everyday. His tutorials are held in rooms near to the road to make it easier for him to gain access.

"It has been physically and mentally challenging, adjusting to this new stage in my life, but I know that I have to learn to be independent.

"Most of my coursemates are straight A stu-

dents, so I will have to work hard to keep up with them.

"I need to maintain my grades so that I can transfer into a degree programme at UM," says Raizan, who is a former student of SMK Bandar Utama and scored 7As and 3Bs in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia.

Shy about disability

Nora Yusof, a first-year linguistics student at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, has been hearing-impaired since the age of 10.

"I became deaf after a bout of high fever and have been wearing a hearing aid ever since," says the seventh of eight siblings who comes from Besut, Terengganu.

Nora says that although her lecturers know about her disability, most of her fellow students do not.

"In school, all my friends knew I couldn't hear so there was nothing to hide. I had to use an old-fashioned hearing aid which was battery operated and had wires all over.



Siti Atikah (left) gets help from her friend Nurazliza Baharom as she works on a Braille.

“However, I am now shy about revealing my disability as I don’t want to be treated differently.”

Nora says that even with her wireless hearing aid, she can only hear 80% of what is said.

In order to gain full understanding, she has to lip read too, so she always sits in the first three rows during lectures so that she can see

the lecturers’ lips move. She also records the lectures in case she misses something and wishes to review them later.

“The lecturers know about my disability; sometimes, they will pay special attention to me.

“However, I am uncomfortable about this as I don’t want to draw attention to myself.”



Nurul Atika (clockwise, top) needs to hold on to her coursemate Lailatul most of the time and wears leg braces.

Nora's senior in college Clementine Vikneswari, who was a student's assistant during the one-week orientation programme held earlier this month, says there is a welfare committee which looks into the needs of disabled students in college.

"I will try to get a senior from Nora's programme to help her with her coursework.

"She is a little worried that she may be left behind," says Clementine.

Adjusting well

Although UM undergraduate Siti Atikah Ayob has stayed in hostels ever since primary school, adjusting to the sheer size of the university campus has been overwhelming.

"As I am new, I have to rely on my sighted friends to take me around everywhere," says Siti Atikah, who has been visually-impaired since birth.

She stays in UM's Seventh Residential College where most of the university's disabled students reside. The college has a special room equipped with computers for the disabled.

Siti Atikah dreams of becoming a teacher but failed to get into her first choice university – Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Tanjung Malim, Perak.

However, she is happy to be in UM.

The Penang-born first-year student in the Arts and Social Science faculty intends to major in Anthropology and Sociology. She did her SPM at SMK Alma in Penang but later moved to SMK Tunku Abdul Malik in Alor Star to continue her studies.

"Being on my own is not a problem for me as I am used to staying in hostels away from my family.

"I know I can adjust quickly and will soon learn to be independent, just like the other second and third-year physically disabled students here."

Siti Atikah believes that disabled students are just as capable as their able-bodied counterparts.

"We just have to work harder and make more sacrifices to succeed," she says, adding that friends and volunteers help by reading out books and lecture notes to her so that she can transcribe them into Braille.

Her Gender Studies tutor Shanta Kumari Ramdas says that she will also try to give Siti Atikah more assistance during tutorials.

"In addition to group discussions, I plan to do more one-to-one work with her, and assist her in the computer lab."

Helpful friends

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) fifth-year Bachelor of English student Syed Fateh Johari Ariffin, 27, may not be in a wheelchair or seem particularly disadvantaged except for a limp,

but he has had to fight many battles since he was 14 years old.

Syed Fateh has end-stage renal failure and has to go for haemodialysis three times a week. Each session lasts four hours and the treatments costs RM1,000 a month.

“My bones are soft and fracture easily if I fall; it is also difficult for me to carry heavy things,” he explains, adding that he slipped on a wet floor and fractured his left hip when he was in his second year at UPM, which is why he now limps.

Syed Fateh also has problems when it comes to stairs – he needs to hold the side railings or his friends' shoulders when going up or down.

Most of the time, he relies heavily on the goodwill of friends and lecturers to help him.

“Travelling around UPM is difficult because the steps on the buses are high and people have to help me climb up or down,”

“I have never borrowed any books on my own from the library as there are too many steps to climb. Besides, the books are too heavy for me to carry. I have to ask my friends to borrow them for me,” he adds.

Syed Fateh's friend Amirul Ahmad takes him to hospital and classes whenever he can, especially when it rains.

Another challenge is arranging classes so that they do not clash with his treatment sessions.

“Sometimes I cannot attend classes because of appointments with specialists, or I find I am dizzy after the dialysis,” he reveals. “But my friends pass me the lecture notes and the lecturers give me extra coaching.”

Another disabled student, UPM Bachelor of Business Administration second-year student Nurul Atika Salim, 20, says that people she encounters are helpful these days.

"Bus drivers always make sure I have alighted before moving," says Nurul, who has had suspected polio in both her legs since she was five.

This has affected her movement, giving her a waddle-like walk which make it difficult for her to climb stairs unaided. Nurul also wears leg braces.

"During orientation week, I felt very shy because I didn't know if people would accept me," she says, adding that when she was young, her friend once told her 'my mother told me not to befriend you' for fear that her 'disease' would spread.

Friends mean a great deal to Nurul, who never goes anywhere without her coursemate Lailatul Taufiqiah Abd Rahman.

Aspiring to be teachers

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's (UKM) visually-impaired Zailani Anuar, 36, and hearing-impaired Noor Mazni Mohd Noor, 22, are enrolled in the Bachelor of Special Education programme in the education faculty, which is disabled-friendly.

"I can only hear if someone speaks close to me, so I face challenges in big lecture halls," says Noor Mazni, whose hearing was affected when she fell off her bicycle when she was six years old.

"My lecturers write notes on the whiteboard or prepare Powerpoint notes for me; my friends copy lecture notes on paper to help me."

First-year student Zailani is thankful for a computer programme and "screen reader" that automatically reads web pages and articles on the computer.

"I lost my sight when I was 30, as a result of a disease called *retinitis pigmentosa*," he explains, adding that now, he can only see shadows.

"It is difficult for me to read Braille because that is something you have to learn from young."

"I can also scan printed articles onto a scanner and the computer software reads it out," Zailani continues. "But the downside is, it can only read certain fonts without background colours."

He still needs the aid of his coursemate Abdul Shukur Johari to read out reference materials to him and, more importantly, to guide him around the campus as he walks with a white cane.

"I help to familiarise him with his surroundings," says Abdul Shukur. "He should be able to find his way around after a semester."

Lecturer in the special education programme at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Manisah Mohd Ali points out that it is important for disabled students to inform the lecturers and faculties of their needs, as each disability has different requirements.

"If they want transport, they will have to request for it, as not all the faculties are aware of their presence especially if they take elective subjects," says Manisah.

"But generally I find that these students are already quite independent when they come to university."



Zailani (left) depends on friends like Abdul Shukor Johari to help him move around the campus grounds.



Clementina (left) plans to help Nora find a fellow student who is willing to tutor her.