



# Inklusion *weltweit*

MALAYSIA

Country Report with a Difference

# Inclusive education in Malaysia

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Source: Centre for Social & Economic Rights, <https://www.cesr.org/malaysia-new-report-right-education-disabled-children-has-important-lessons-government/>

According to the World Health Organisation and the World Bank, an estimate of one billion people around the world experience some form of disability. Of those, approximately 93 to 150 million of them are children. Over the decades, there have been numerous studies that indicate these children are less likely to go to school than other children and when they do attend school, it is likely to be in a segregated setting. In Malaysia, there have been government initiatives to improve the state of education for learners with disabilities. However, Malaysian advocates of disability rights continue to lament the mismatch between existing policies and practice, and the needs and requirements of the learners with disabilities.

## The Malaysian situation for people with disabilities

In Malaysia, there have been government initiatives to improve the state of education for learners with disabilities as seen in Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, Special Education Regulations 2013 and the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025. It is estimated that Malaysia's Ministry of Education had registered a total 87,574 students with disabilities as of June 2019. Of the total, about 2,492 of them are currently enrolled in the special education schools and 68,874 students in the Special Education Integrated Programme, which comes under mainstream schools. Education services for young people with disabilities have seen an incremental improvement in Malaysia, evolving from catering onto to those with physical disabilities to encompassing those with learning disabilities. Instead of being completely dependent on the work of charities and non-governmental organisations, there has been an expansion of services and provisions by the Malaysian government in recent decades. Nonetheless, the successful and effective implementation of these policies and practices continue to be debated.

An overview of the literature on the situation of people with disabilities in Malaysian education suggests that this discrepancy is caused by conflicting and contradicting definitions of disability used by various government agencies meant to assist them. It has been argued that some of the common practices in educating people with disabilities are discriminatory and poorly planned. This report elucidates the challenges faced by young people with disabilities in the Malaysian education system, the Malaysian government's efforts to promote the participation of people with disabilities and contribute to the 2030 Agenda, "Leave no one behind". The report also describes the ways in which Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Malaysia (KAS MY) can support educational institutions or civil society organisations within the framework of our partner structures that are committed to the advancement of these young people.

### The biggest hurdles for young Malaysian learners

A recent study by UNICEF Malaysia revealed that young people with disabilities are often excluded from society, portrayed negatively and hidden. In this survey, it was discovered that 43 percent of Malaysians believe that people with disabilities would be disruptive in a mainstream classroom. Many young people with disabilities face common barriers that negatively affect their educational experience, regardless of which part of the world they reside in. These hurdles include: (a) a lack of physical accessibility to school buildings and unsuitable learning resources, (b) discrimination and prejudice which prevents people with disabilities from having an equal or equitable education just like their peers, (c) exclusion or segregation from regular school settings, (d) lower quality of education, including in regular schools where children with disabilities have been 'integrated' into the existing education system. Similarly, Malaysian learners with disabilities struggle with these barriers as a result of the problematic implementation of policies and practices for a more inclusive Malaysian education system. This can be explained by examining three key areas where young people are placed in a disabling position within the Malaysian education system:

**Accessing provisions and support.** The existence of multiple agencies and various casework procedures cause parents of young people with disabilities to endure excessive bureaucratic procedures to seek reasonable accommodations in educational institutions. The major downside is that even if parents are successful in acquiring the recognition of their children's disabilities, it does not make them automatically eligible for the provisions available. This is due to the fact that applications are considered through lengthy evaluations by councils under the Department of Social Welfare and Special Education Department which have strict criteria to determine the eligibility of the learner. Moreover, opportunities for government provisions are either limited to young people with severe impairments or diagnosed with mild disabilities. Consequently, caregivers and young people with disabilities face insurmountable physical and psychological burdens to access

provisions and support, causing them to lose out on the benefits of an inclusive education.

**Type of support acquired.** In the event a young person with disabilities successfully obtains the service, the choice of education they are offered is either vocational training or a special education school, which offers a reduced national curriculum. Both types of education do not necessarily unleash a child's full potential and their prospects for further education or employment. Although a special needs education does not mean to segregate and place young people with disabilities in "special" places, it is often implemented in this manner. This is because the Special Education Regulations 2013 defines "special education" as "an education for a pupil with special educational needs in a special school, or school which implements the Special Education Integrated Programme or Inclusive Education Programme, at the level of: (a) pre-school education, (b) primary education, (c) secondary education, or (d) post-secondary education." While these forms of education are beneficial, they simultaneously reinforce harmful stereotypes of intellectual inferiority towards people with disabilities that affect their future.

**The learning environment and attitudes of teachers and peers.** Numerous studies on this subject highlight the pervasiveness of low expectations and negative attitudes towards people with disabilities in learning spaces. As a consequence of the segregative nature of special education, young people with disabilities often face social exclusion. A study by the National Family Support Groups (2018) revealed that parents of children without disabilities can be a significant hurdle to fostering an inclusive schooling environment. Besides the pervasiveness of bullying and other forms of discriminatory behaviour towards learners with disabilities, parents and peers without disabilities have reportedly demonstrated their opposition towards special needs children due to their own ignorance. Teachers who opt to decline working with these learners are not to be entirely blamed, especially when mainstream schools within the Malaysian education system already experience structural

challenges that impinge on the capacity of teachers to take on the extra responsibilities that come with implementing inclusive practices.

## Inclusive education as defined in the Malaysian system

Inclusive education is about ensuring each and every student can fully and meaningfully participate in their learning environment alongside their peers. Instead of simply trying to integrate young people with disabilities into general classroom settings, an inclusive education includes a systemic transformation of the whole education system and school community to provide sustainable and equal education for all learners regardless of their identity, background and abilities. For an inclusive education environment to be established, there has to be a sustained effort to remove all kinds of barriers to learning and participation. This includes normalising differentiation and adaptive learning tools, medium of instruction and teaching methods that are accessible to diverse students, and implementing an accommodating and flexible curriculum. It would also require material efforts to ensure the educational environment is accessible and advocacy to foster understanding, respect and appreciation of disabilities and diversity within the learning community.

Despite the global expectations set in defining an inclusive education, the Malaysian education system still operates on the basis that young people with disabilities need to be either excluded or assimilated into the existing structures of mainstream schools. This is encapsulated in how inclusive education is defined in the Special Education Regulation 2013 as "an education programme for students with special educational needs in which they can attend in the same classroom together with other students". However, as outlined in United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – General Comment No. 4, if students with disabilities are placed within mainstream classes "without

accompanying structural changes” is not considered as inclusion.

Malaysia’s Ministry of Education (MOE) has introduced the Inclusive Education Programme to place young people with disabilities fully or partially in subjects taught at mainstream school settings. The extent of implementing inclusive education as an established practice in mainstream education institutions is yet to be seen despite the programme, and therefore, have impeded its spread across the education system. MOE has encouraged schools to adopt the programme but it has not been fully embraced as the decision is placed in the hands of the school leadership. Resultantly, this set-up reinforces the role of parents and activists to continuously and strategically advocate for an inclusive education practice in their own learning environments.

## Promoting the participation of people with disabilities

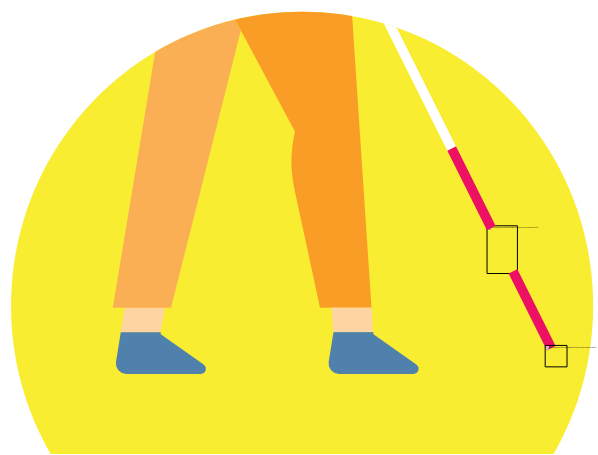
Current services and provisions provided by the Malaysian government today indicate that there is still a lot of room for improvement so that it can effectively and meaningfully promote the participation of people with disabilities. The most glaring issue that is detrimental to the government’s ability to enhance its efforts to address the participation and representation of people with disabilities is the lack of data that shows the actual number of people with disabilities in the country.

According to the Department of Social Welfare which manages the Persons with Disabilities registry (as of September 2021), there are a total of 582,944 persons with disabilities which is approximately 1.8 percent of the Malaysian population. On the contrary, the National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019 which has been regarded as a more precise estimation, states that 11.1 percent of Malaysians above 18 years old have disabilities, and that 4.7 percent children aged from 2 to 17 years old have at least one functional difficulty such as hearing, vision,



communication/comprehension, learning, mobility and emotion. The survey revealed that 1 in 4 Malaysian adults experience one or more functional difficulties such as seeing, hearing, remembering, walking, self-care and communicating. The discrepancy of numbers between the survey and government registry suggest that there is a significant number of people with disabilities that have opted out of registration. Eventhough the registration of people with disabilities is essential to provide benefits and assistance from the government, the reluctance that people and their parents may face most likely stem from the fears that their registration may further strengthen the prejudice attached to being formally labelled as “disabled”.

Compounded by the limited, non-inclusive choices within the education system, it is inevitable that existing statistics show the participation of people with disabilities in the Malaysian workforce to be as low as 1 percent. Nonetheless, there have been some efforts to slowly improve the participation of persons with disabilities in some aspects. For instance, a community representative for people with disabilities is appointed to be a Senator by the King of Malaysia on the advice of the Prime Minister every 3 years. The government has also



introduced incentives for the private sector to achieve at least 1 percent employment of people with disabilities, such as tax exemptions, business loans, rental schemes and training grants. Congruent with this vision, only four ministries in the government comply with the 1 percent employment quota for people with disabilities despite the policy being implemented since 1989.

Besides financial incentives to employ people with disabilities, it is yet to be seen if the Ministry of Education will develop a comprehensive framework to encourage and financially support educators, coaches and trainers to specialise in meeting the demand for expanding services and provisions for learners with disabilities. At the moment, there are six Malaysian universities that offer Master's Degrees in special and inclusive education, and three independent institutions that offer professional certificates. The fees to enrol in these courses are costly, which may be a significant barrier to the upskilling and capacity-building of educators that can support the government's commitment to developing an inclusive education system.

## Can Malaysia leave no one behind?

According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the Ministry of Education is targeting for students with disabilities to be in their inclusive programme at a rate of 30 percent by 2015 and 75 percent by 2025. At a conference held on

December 2019, the Ministry announced that their achievement rate for providing students with disabilities an inclusive education is 60.9 percent. However, a closer breakdown of the data revealed that the true inclusion rate as it stands today (as of October 2020) is 20 percent because enrolments in special education schools were excluded from the Ministry's calculations.

Seeking better ways to cater for the advancement of young people with disabilities is merely the beginning of a long-term commitment to creating an inclusive education system. Although often universal, some of the challenges faced by these young people are particular to the Malaysian context, and thus, require the cooperation between policy makers, political leaders, family units and advocacy groups. KAS MY has been actively working in Malaysia with a variety of local partners such as think tanks, training institutions, government agencies and civil society organisations. Most of KAS MY's projects have been dedicated to advancing economic development, sustainability, inclusion of women and youth as well as security. Nevertheless, there is plenty of room to support partners, old and new, by encouraging them to pursue strategic initiatives that aim to address the long-standing misconceptions of people with disabilities and strengthening inclusive policies. Besides actively seeking out new partners that are dedicated to the advancing inclusion of people with disabilities, KAS MY also encourages its partners to organise events in an inclusive manner through accessible venues and implement an equal opportunity policy in their activities.



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