Public universities must be disabled-friendly in 10 years

Institutions share what steps they have taken at their campuses.

By REBECCA RAJENDRAM and SANDHYA MENON

ALL public higher education institutions (HEIs) must become completely disability-friendly within the next decade, says Education Minister Dr Maszlee Malik.

This is part of the guidelines for the OKU (Disabled) Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions policy that was implemented in January.

“We do not want anymore cases where students who fulfilled course requirements are not accepted by higher education institutions because they are disabled, as there are no facilities to cater to them,” he said during the launch of the guidelines on Thursday at the International Islamic University (IIUM).

“The reason for this inclusive education policy is to eliminate the separation of GOU students from other students,” he added.

He added that Malaysia is capable of forming an inclusive culture in education that does not sideline the GOU community.

Access for the GOU to education will be done radically across the country, he said, adding that he hoped to see the policy with the 12th Malaysia Plan.

Maszlee said it was everyone’s responsibility, not just the ministry’s, to ensure the GOU community’s rights are always protected.

This year, Maszlee said, a special entrance stream into IPTAs was created for GOU, B40, athletes and Orang Asli.

The ministry, he added, has already implemented a diverse Policy in national schools so that no child is denied their right to education.

“The GOU Inclusion in Higher Education Institutions Policy will be carried out to ensure that all higher education institutions ensure facilities and continuous research is given to GOU students,” he said.

Maszlee gave examples on the lack of ramps, lifts and narrow toilets that can access the facilities at the institutions.

“Fundamentally, as a university we want to ensure that opportunities for higher education are not limited to only a selected few,” he added.

“The reason for this inclusive education policy is to eliminate the separation of GOU students from other students,” he said.

Maszlee added that Malaysia is definitely doable and manageable.

Infrastructure needs to be upgraded so that the community can access the facilities at the institutions.

He gave examples on the lack of ramps, lifts and narrow toilets that all need to be looked into.

Maszlee acknowledged that the ministry does not have the funds to do all these upgrades and changes.

As of now, he added, higher education institutions are using their own funds to carry out the changes. He urged the private sector to step forward and help fund the changes needed for the benefit of the GOU community.

Maszlee said the guidelines state that all IPTA must see the policy and establish an GOU Services Unit that is separate from the Students Affairs Unit.

The GOU Services Unit will cater not just to GOU students but staff as well, he said, adding that he hopes the new unit will be placed under the vice-chancellor’s office.

Although it is not compulsory for private higher education institutions (HEIs) to follow the guidelines, Maszlee hopes they will also adopt it to increase accessibility to education for the GOU community. So far, he added, Universiti Malaya (UM), UKM and Universiti Sains Malaysia have implemented the policy while the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus is one of the IPTAs using the policy.

Therefore, Maszlee said, universities must ensure that all students are able to access all information and are able to learn as well as their able bodied course mates and get jobs on graduation.

“We are also very inclusive in all sense of the word, whether it be for our students or staff. “My first secretary in Sunway was a paraplegic, Lee Ying Xue, and the helped me to ensure that the university was as disabled-friendly as possible,” she said, adding that Lee left to become a paraplegian.

There need tactile paving on walkways and sidewalks, audio announcements and braille indications fitted in all lifts as well as wheelchair friendly ramps.

“We are definitely very supportive of education for special children. We are supporting the Orang Asli-Irmaah Sabang through hosting the teachers’ camp in Sunway from Friday until Sunday. “A total of 100 teachers have checked in for this camp. Selangor state vice-chancellor Dr Sri Mahath Mahmud has been supporting this initiative,” she said.

University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus provost and CEO Prof Graham Kendall said: “As a leading international university, we are committed to equality and diversity under the UK’s Equality Act 2010.”

Therefore we are committed to providing equal opportunities to students where there are GOU students and the highest standards.

“At the University of Nottingham Malaysia, we adhere to the principles which allows us to recruit students based on the entry requirements and not based on any disability,” he said.

Prof Kendall said provisions are in place to support differently-able students by the university’s Wellbeing and Learning Support Services as well as disability access throughout the campus.

“Fundamentally, as a university we want to ensure that opportunities for higher education are not limited to only a selected few,” he added.

“GOU gives special attention to its GOU staff and students with its disability inclusion policy,” he said.

Prof Dr Abdul Aziz said being inclusive is not only about the physical aspects, it includes the learning processes and experiences so that they are able to learn as well as their able bodied course mates and get jobs on graduation.

“Based on our experience, the execution of this policy even on the physical and facility aspects is definitely doable and manageable.

“Doesn’t require an entire new building. What’s needed is some adjustments and creativity from what we currently have.

“For example, making sure that they get routes and classrooms on the ground floor and making minor renovations to existing facilities,” he said.

All these can be done in stages, adding that UM is looking to do it with open arms so that more universities will be able to facilitate disabled students just like the Institute of Medical Research.