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Experiencing Inclusive Design (Part 1): Promoting 'Barrier-Free Built Environment' In The University

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Abstract

The article will clarify the importance of collaborative development among various professionals and organizations in order to achieve a 'barrier-free built environment', focusing on the University of Malaya as a case study. It will share experience on the education of inclusive design for students who will become professionals and responsible in implementing the legislation relating to safety, accessibility and usability of the built environment. These principles, which will be explained, are essential for the creation of a barrier-free or non-handicapping environment. As the objective is on the issue of educating professionals relevant, it will introduce methods in teaching professionals as a strategy to advocate for a 'barrier-free built environment'. The article will also illustrate the efforts done in promoting the agenda in the university which have been implemented around the case study. Recently, a more enlightened approach has developed of creating gardens, which can be enjoyed by vision-impaired alongside their sighted peers. This will be integrated in the next article: Experiencing Inclusive Design (Part 2): Sensory Parks.

Introduction

It is increasingly difficult for the disabled persons¹ to move around and use the built environment in the higher educational establishment. This is because previous planning policies and implementation did not set out to provide for a 'barrier-free built environment'². For example, there were no provisions for slopes with equal or less than 1: 12 for the wheelchair users, lifts were provided incomplete without Braille buttons and audio signals for the vision-impaired persons. There is a lot to be done that could allow the disabled persons to participate equally like everyone else, in using the campus facilities. However, disabled persons and collaborators have yet to make inclusion in planning as priority in their efforts to promote for a 'barrier-free built environment'.

Survey had shown lack of awareness and knowledge on the needs of disabled persons among campus citizens. This is the main argument to push for disability awareness training to be one important activity where it would be integrated as the culture for a 'caring campus society'. Practice had revealed that just by referring to the regulations, is not enough to achieve the desired needs of disabled persons unless all parties are involved with the awareness programme. Not many would articulate their concerns by relating developmental issues³ to the cause of disabled persons. When more disabled persons and their concerns are respectfully acknowledged, this will move towards an all-encompassing agenda, which would be integral to the mainstream development of planning the campus. At the end of 1999, there were 19, 771 disabled persons registered with the Social Welfare Department. The section 25 of the Educational Act (1961) stipulates that the

¹ Disabled persons means an individual who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of her/his major life activities (Disability-Related Terms and Definitions, available: <http://www.duke.edu/web/equity/disab-terms.htm> [Accessed: June 12, 2003])

² 'Barrier-free Built Environment' means unhindered, without obstructions, to enable disabled persons free passage to and from and use of the facilities in the built environment.

(Ministry of Housing and Local Government administrative document [1999] *Guidelines Requirements for Access into Public Buildings for Disabled Persons*, Kuala Lumpur)

³ Development issues refers to the inclusion of disabled persons needs and concerns in policymaking and decision-making of an organization, that relates to mainstream developmental changes.