

The Development of Special Education and Its Programme Structure in Higher Education, Malaysia

马来西亚特殊教育的发展及 高校特殊教育本科课程设置的方向

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Abstract: Special Education (SE) has hitherto been given insufficient attention in Malaysia in the education system as well as in research. Developmental trends in world education have rendered special education an indispensable component of modern education. The need for professional training of SE teachers and the design of courses and course contents have become an important issue of legitimate concern for relevant stakeholders in Malaysian institutions of higher learning. This study will delve into the background of SE in Malaysia and the current status of its development in selected institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. It will then discuss the needs and efforts to develop undergraduate SE programmes, their pedagogic structure and contents with a view to contributing to their formulation and the evaluation of their relevance and effectiveness. The discussion begins with the review of SE in Malaysia and its place in the current educational setup. This is followed by an examination of the growing need to cope with the changing social and functional roles of education, the development of undergraduate programmes and the future direction of its development. The study result shows that there are many considerations to take into account and issues to overcome before a strong foundation for SE in Malaysia can be built up.

Keywords: Special Education, Curriculum Development, Malaysia Higher Education

摘 要: 特殊教育事业日益受到各界的关注, 发展步伐不得不加速。伴随世界教育趋势的发展, 特殊教育已成为现代教育不可或缺的一环。专业特殊教育教师的培养、课程的设置等问题于是成了教育界和特殊教育相关人士共同关注的重要议题。本文着重梳理马来西亚特殊教育的发展背景及其在马来西亚特定高校中的发展现状, 继而探析特殊

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教育本科课程设置的需求与方向，以促进课程的设置和评估其相关性及其有效性。本文思考的问题是，课程的设置和发展的方向如何在因应需求日增的同时，兼顾特殊教育对社会的影响和职能角色的变化。本文探析的结果为，在构建更稳固的基础前，马来西亚特殊教育的发展仍有许多有待思量的因素和克服的难题。

关键词：特殊教育，课程设置，马来西亚高校

1. Introduction

Following the trend of world education reform, Malaysia has accepted and rectified the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) that emphasizes on education for all. Inclusive education, is supported by the Ministry of Education and it has been deemed by the Ministry of Education as the most effective means of study for both special children as well as typical children (Ministry of Education, 2004). This means children regardless of their special needs have the same right to education as their peers, and children with or without special needs should learn together in the same classroom (NECIC, 2012). In the Law of Malaysia Act 685 Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, clause 28 clearly states that persons with disabilities shall not be excluded from pre-school, primary, secondary and higher education on the basis of disabilities. This clause is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that ratified by the Government of Malaysia on 19 July 2010 (NECIC, 2012).

Despite of the government's recognition of equal education for children with special needs, issue of quality programmes for children with special needs is still a concern (Abdul, Mazlina & Hasrul, 2017). Early child-care and education (ECCE) teachers have the feeling of helplessness and ignorance when issues of children with special needs is brought up (Abdul, Mazlina & Hasrul, 2017). Issues such as "do not know where to refer to" and "do not know what to do with these special children" are often what pre-school teachers share when asked to comment on including special needs children in their general pre-school centres. Ali, Mustapha, and Jelas (2006) in their study of the outcome of the implementation of inclusive education in primary and secondary schools in Malaysia, found that although teachers mainly agreed that inclusive education is appropriate for special needs students, there is a great need of special education teachers in the mainstream classroom to assist the general teachers. Only 29.4% of the general teachers in the study have the training and skills to teach special needs student. This suggests that more training programme should be provided for all the teachers to increase the teachers' competency in teaching special needs children and to ensure the inclusive programme being implemented successfully. Malaysia's education system has also embarked on reform aimed at achieving equity in provision of education. Special education is among the education services

that had received much attention in terms of Malaysia educational revolution. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) proposes 11 specific strategic and operational shifts that helps in transforming and lifting the education system. The first operational shifts emphasizes the fair provision of quality education opportunities at an international standard. To achieve this, one of the main task is to increase the provision in terms of hardware and teaching resources that target to build fair and competitive environment for students with special needs. The ultimate aim of the proposal is by year 2015, schools that provide the facilities and materials needed for learners with special needs will create a better and more supportive learning environment; teachers of special education students will be equipped with sufficient special training that help them understanding the challenges of the students; and to master the teaching strategies of special learners. (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013: E-11).

Since the special education has received attention in Malaysia education field, it is important that serious attention should be played in the curriculum development and the teachers' professional training as these will have deep implication in the development and quality of special education (Boudersa, 2016).

In order to help setting the direction of special education curriculum development in Malaysia, analysis on the special education historical evolution, the current development and the issues faced, were conducted. As a result, clearer directions of the special education undergraduate curriculum in Malaysia were suggested from three dimensions: the educational philosophy, the curriculum settings and development direction. This paper aims to set some guidelines to the development of special education and the professionalism of special education teachers in Malaysia.

2. Development of Special Education in Malaysia

In the 61 years since Malaysia's independence from British colonial rule, special ducation has gone through a tough journey. In the Education Blueprint 2013-2025, special education development is listed as one of the major concern to ensure equity for all students regardless of their levels of ability. Special education has now developed beyond the primary and secondary levels and is now made available at the tertiary level. Officially recognized diploma and degree programmes are being offered by several public and private universities and colleges. Examining the curriculum of special education programmes at tertiary education levels will help in understanding the nature and problems of special education in Malaysia and would contribute to its future development.

2.1 Development of the Education System

Malaysia was brought into the orbit of Western colonial rule when has been colonized by Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Japan, and finally gained independent in year 1957. Modern education in Malaya began during the British regime when elementary schools in English, Malay and Chinese were introduced to cater to the needs of the growing numbers of children especially of the Malays and Chinese.

The pedagogic role of these schools was primarily secular and utilitarian in focus with the purpose of providing sufficient proficiencies in English or the vernaculars and other subjects for employment in junior posts in administration or commerce. All pupils, irrespective of mental or physical abilities, had no choice but to attend these schools. The only exceptions were a small number of schools devoted to the learning of Islamic teachings. These historical circumstances explained the negligence of the special needs of a section of disadvantaged children.

The evolution of Malaysia's special education has witnessed different chronological stages (Lee and Low, 2014), from the early budding stage before 1900, the initial involvement of the local and religious groups (1900-1957), the development stage under the comprehensive management of the Federal Government (1957-1990) and modern Malaysia stage which supervises the implementation of inclusive education as its main focus (1990 to the present).

Before British colonial rule was effectively imposed, early Chinese communities in areas such as Penang had already established learning centres for Chinese children. The colonial administration as well as Christian missionaries founded schools in the towns that utilized English as the sole medium of instruction. Few schools were in existence then. They included missionary schools founded by religious organizations, Chinese schools built by local Chinese communities, and Malay schools run by Islamic organizations (Sekolah Pondok). The special education in this period is only mainly on training the students' daily survival skills.

In the 1920s, many community-based and non-government organizations established a number of special education classes and schools based on the needs of social welfare. Among the schools for the visually impaired, there were St Nicholas Home for the Blind, which was formed by Anglican medical missionaries in 1926 (Jayasooria and Ooi, 1994), and Princess Elizabeth Special Education School in Johor Bahru by the British Strait Government in 1948-1950 (Lee and Low, 2014). In 1956, the first school for students with hearing impairment was formed in Penang, known as the Federal School for Deaf Children. At this stage, given the emphasis on the functional limitations of individuals with disabilities, institutionalisation and educational exclusion were common practice in Malaysia.

After independence in 1957, the Malaysian government gradually integrated special education into the national education system. For example, blind and deaf schools are set up for visually impaired and hearing impaired, special education classes are set up in primary

and secondary schools, and special education teacher training classes are set up in colleges and universities in the 1960s. The first visually impaired teacher training school (Maktab Perguruan Ilmu Khas) was founded in 1977 in Selangor. In 1983, the first visually impaired children boarding school was established. The special education at this stage has a great span and progress in many aspects such as organizational construction, financial budget, curriculum setting, and teacher training in Malaysia.

In Malaysia's Education Act 1996, a chapter on special education was included in this act, which provides a legal framework for special education for government agencies and civil organizations, and for the first time given the official definition for "special education", "special School", "students with special needs" and other related terms. In 1997, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced the Education Rules (Special Education) which defined three special education programmes that were implemented in Malaysian schools: (1) the special school, (2) the integration programme, and (3) the inclusive programme.

When the first two schools were introduced, many criticisms appealed as both applied the principle of segregating special children and violated the concept of inclusive education. As for inclusive programme, the MOE adopted "The Least Restrictive Environment" model. In 1998, 53 primary schools and 10 secondary schools participated in the inclusive education pilot programme, providing a new space for schooling for visually impaired children. In 2013, the Malaysian government responded positively to the objection to the theme and specific content of the 1997 Education Regulations in the "Education Regulations" promulgated, and proposed more specific strategies and guidance for the inclusive of education (Song, 2016).

2.2 Development of Special Education

In Malaysia, all children, including those with special needs, have equal opportunities to receive free primary and secondary education. With regards to special education, the status of its development will be gauged from its availability as well as accessibility to those who need it. Allowing all children, including special children, to receive compulsory education is a basic policy for Malaysia's national development. This paper presents the development status of special education from two aspects: the special education training institutions and the training course.

Special education in Malaysia is governed by specific units in different ministries of the government. The Ministry of Education is responsible for students with visual impairment, hearing impairment and mild learning disabilities; the Ministry of Women, Family and Social Welfare is concerned with the physical disorders and moderate to severe cases of disabilities of students; and the Ministry of Health is focuses on early detection and identification of children with special needs (Lee and Low, 2014).

Malaysia's education system is diverse and complex, with 7,776 different types of primary schools, 28 of which are special education schools; a total of 2,411 secondary schools and 6 special education schools. In addition to the above special education schools, the government also has special education classes in primary and secondary schools of different origins, with 314 classes in primary school and 152 classes in secondary school (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2017: 11-15). In addition to this, there are many special education centers set up by civil society organizations to meet the increasing practical needs.

2.3 Special Educators Training Courses

According to the Malaysian Ministry of Education's 2017 statistics, there are currently 20 national universities, 478 private universities, university colleges and colleges in Malaysia, with a total of 498 higher education schools. There are 11 colleges with special education courses, see Table 1.

Table 1 Special Education Courses Officially Recognized In Malaysia

No.	Institutions	Diploma	Degree	Master	Ph.D.
1	University of Malaya			Master of Education (Special Education)	
2	University Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)		Bachelor of Education (Special Education) with Honours	Master of Education (Course work) Master of Education (Research & Course work)	Doctor of Philosophy
3	The University of Nottingham Malaysia campus (UNMC)			MA Special and Inclusive Education	
4	Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)		Bachelor of Education (Special Education) with Honours	Master of Arts (Education) - Special Education (Mixed-mode)	

5	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	Bachelor of Education with Honours (Special Education)	Master of Education in Special Education (Course work)	Doctor of Philosophy (Special Education)
6	Institut Pendidikan Guru (IPG)	Bachelor of Teaching (Hon) Special Education		
7	Institute of Teacher Education Ilmu Khas	Bachelor of Teaching (Hon) Special Education		
8	Open University Malaysia (OUM)	Bachelor of Teacher-ship (Special Education) with Honours		
9	Quest International University	Bachelor of Special Needs Education (Hon)		
10	Kolej Dika	Diploma in Special Education (Early Years)		
11	Kolej Mentari	Diploma in Special Needs		

Source: <http://www2.mqa.gov.my/mqr/> updated 17 April 2018

According to the above data, colleges and universities offering special education courses only account for 2.2% of the total, and the number of special education teachers trained is basically unable to meet the needs of the realities. Clearly, in view of the potential demand for special education, there is an urgent need to make available special needs education at all levels of learning. But to achieve this daunting task many issues and problems have to be faced and overcome.

2.4 Issues and Problems

Issues and problems concerning the proper development of special education in Malaysia go beyond the training of teachers and the design of appropriate curricular structure but also

involves effective leadership in education management, the provision of infrastructure, the conduct of professional research and development (Muhamad & Alfa, 2016).

A fundamental problem facing the development of special education is the shortage of trained special education teachers. This situation is the result of years of official neglect of special education. Training may only be provided by tertiary institutions of education. But with only 11 colleges and universities that offer special education programmes, it will be an uphill task to produce an adequate corps of qualified teachers to meet the needs of special education children (Table 1). Moreover, not too many students would opt to seek a career in special education. This is further exacerbated by the preference to work in the towns where prospects for career advancement are superior to those in rural areas. The curriculum of special education programmes on offer is often oriented towards theoretical principles and geared towards providing an academic rather than professional pathway. There are more learning modules in pedagogy and psychology theory than in more basic modules on languages, mathematics, art, music, and related subjects. The curricular design of these programmes are relatively independent of each other and lack pedagogic linkages. This imbalance in curricular orientation has resulted in emphasis on theoretical knowledge of special education teachers who lack the necessary skills to effectively match their theoretical and practical knowledge. Indeed, special education teachers need to receive adequate hands-on training on how to apply the theoretical knowledge, such as the ability in early detection, emotional and behavioural adjustments, devising individualized teaching plans and conducting action research.

Special education in Malaysia is managed and supervised by a cross-ministerial committee with members from three different departments in the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women, Family and Social Welfare, and the Ministry of Health. Each ministry has its own ideas about special education and specific mandates arising from dissimilar management orientations, approaches, and lack of communication and co-ordination. The outcome has led to inconsistencies in the strategies and implementation of special education and related matters.

Another problem is the lack of research on curricular contents and design as well as on effective ways of classroom and practical teaching. Progress thus far in the special education in Malaysia is at best modest, and there is much room for improvement in the curriculum and teaching system.

Therefore, it is necessary to make adjustments and changes in the curriculum system. The government should invest more in the development of curriculum and teaching system that suit to the local conditions, and able to meet the inclusive education settings. With the education reform trends, Malaysian tertiary education institutions should also consider modify their curriculum and programme goals, re-examine the curriculum, system, and development direction of the curriculum to facilitate the development of special education in the future.

3. Undergraduate Programme Structure and Directions

An adequate learning programme will have great impact on the building of professionalism in students (Sparapani and Perez, 2015). The structure of special needs education programme should be given serious consideration in order to empower students to play their rightful role in society as creative citizens and to contribute to the wellbeing of the country.

3.1 The United Nations Statement and Framework for Action

In 1994, representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organizations formed the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain. They agreed on a statement on the education of all disabled children that advocated the concept of inclusion. At the same time, Bengt Lindqvist, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Disability, reported that everyone regardless of different abilities, should be given the equal opportunity to receive education. “Inclusive education” is promoted as the guiding principle of all education systems and member countries are urged to recognize the needs of all children as recommended in the “Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action”(UNESCO, 1994)

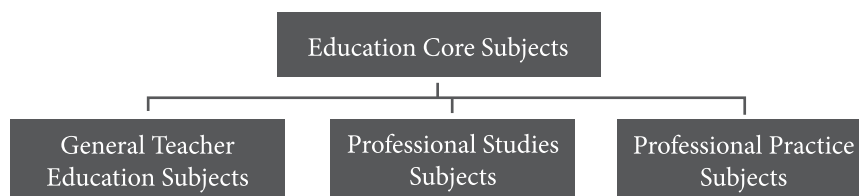
UNESCO sees “inclusiveness” as “a dynamic way of responding positively to student diversity, treating individual differences not as problems, but as enriching learning opportunities” (UNESCO, 2005). The programme structure of special education courses in Malaysian tertiary institutions should take into account of global educational trends based on the Inclusive Education concept. This may be accomplished, among other things, through innovative reform of special education, making available effective training of special education teachers, and elevating the quality of education to ensure equal learning opportunities to all.

The emphasis on “inclusive education” is to recognize it as a ceaseless process to find better ways of responding to diversity. It involves the importance of always reminded of the diversity of children’s learning abilities so that they may be motivated to learn within their own style and capacity. The process calls for gathering, collating, and evaluating more information about special handicaps and obstacles, and to explore ways to amend and improve relevant policies and practices. This will generate creative ideas to drive efforts to overcome various problems. Inclusive education implies that all students are able to attend regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school. Attendance and active participation in class will ensure incremental and quality learning, and targeted learning outcomes will be enriched by experience and skills in decision making. The entire implies that groups that are at risk should receive careful observation and, if necessary, steps should be taken to safeguard their learning rights in the education system (UNESCO, 2005).

3.2 Programme Structure

The curricular of special education undergraduate programmes should be based on the principle of “inclusive education” in keeping with development trends of education in the 21st century. The current special education programme structure comprises five modes according to different value orientations. These are the ability-based mode, which emphasizes the training of the professional competence of special education teachers; the teacher qualification-oriented mode, on which the state government requirement is set as the basis for teacher qualification standard; the teacher education integration mode, that focused on the teachers’ lifelong education, that integrate the pre-service and post-service education of the teachers; the child-centered curriculum mode; and theory and practice-based mode. The philosophy and principle of these modes are to enable teachers to be conscious, active and flexible in their ideology, knowledge, ability and skills to respond to different teaching situations (Ding and Chen, 2005). There are basically two categories of course components to choose to complete a fully-accredited programme in Malaysia: one is the compulsory and elective course subjects; the other is the education core courses that comprised general teacher education subjects, professional studies subjects, and professional practice subjects (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Special education curriculum system



General teacher education subjects generally include education history, pedagogy principles, curriculum principles, teaching principles, educational psychology, informational instructional design and practice, action research; professional core courses include special education introduction, special child development and psychology, special Child testing assessment, special child rehabilitation education, Braille, sign language, inclusive education, integrated education; and professional skill-based subjects include educational practice and skills, education research and study, practicum, thesis and others.

Having designed the core and elective subjects in the curriculum, the training of special education professionals should be systematic to ensure the quality of special needs educators.

3.3 Development Direction

Special education has become an extremely important part of the national education. The appeal of special education in colleges and universities depends a great deal on the quality of the

curriculum and ultimately the development of special education in the country. The following discussion will explore the likely path of development of undergraduate programme structure for special education in Malaysian colleges and universities.

The concept of education keeps pace with the times. The trajectory of human development is continuous evolution. Therefore, when setting up special education courses, colleges and universities should clarify the development of realistic trends and set up courses according to appropriate educational concepts, keep pace with the times, set professional-oriented courses, and promote students in special The comprehensive development of education has shaped special education teachers who meet the needs of society.

The curriculum is more systematic. The curriculum should be based on the careful planning of the actual needs, from the educational purpose, set the training objectives, and then according to the specific teaching direction and the students' ability set the curriculum. The curriculum should focus on the connection between general knowledge and professional ethics courses to highlight its relevance and level, and benefit students to master the core content of professional disciplines.

Emphasizing on professional ethics and skills. The special education curriculum should focus on professional ethics. Students should master the professional ethics of the discipline and understand the connection between professional ethics and skills. After mastering the basic knowledge, let the students master at least one special education professional skill to realize the comprehensive development of knowledge and skills. Therefore, the curriculum should be able to assist students in selecting and exerting their specialties, giving students the basic ability to teach and practice in the future and improve their professional performance.

The combination of theory and practice. A good theory should guide the conduct of practical work, and good practice is based on theory (Ornstein, 1999). Therefore, a good curriculum should be able to strengthen the practice in theoretical teaching, so that students can master relevant knowledge and cultivate their ability to use and practice. Theory and practice complement each other. The combination of the two, students learn the theoretical knowledge, after repeated practice of the process, professional ability will continue to improve.

Improve the ability of action research. Special education teachers are not only a teacher, but also regarded as "experts" in related fields. In the real teaching process, there are often many emergencies and many uncertain situations occur. Therefore, teachers must have the ability to find problems, face problems and solve problems, and safe themselves in a difficult situation. From this point of view, the special education curriculum should include action research courses to train and train students' ability to explore and solve problems.

The curriculum of special education courses should be designed to help students effectively understand the theoretical knowledge of the profession and master the professional skills of practice, thus enriching the humanities quality of students and promoting students' knowledge and ability in the professional field for future special education. This will help laying a solid foundation for future development in the field of special education.

4. Conclusion

The special education professional training is not an easy task. The pre-service training of special education is a crucial starting point. In line with the big environmental change, the setting of the undergraduate special education courses in colleges and universities should aim at meeting the development needs of modern education, continuously update the educational concept, laying a good foundation in professional ethics and emphasizing on the individual development of students. As a result, the well trained special needs educators will be able to provide professional services to the special needs students and help in promoting the development of a harmonious society.

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