

THE INCLUSION OF DISABLED PERSONS IN HONG KONG'S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: AN EXPLORATORY NETNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to share findings of a netnographic inquiry on the inclusion of disabled persons in Hong Kong's higher education system. We extract data from three sources which are Hong Kong's legal document, selected Hong Kong's higher learning institutions' website, and an online interview with a disabled local. From the analysis of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, the country protects its disabled citizens from various forms of discrimination and harassment, but there is no provision relating to reasonable accommodation. The analysis of the universities' websites also highlights the provision of various support for disabled students, registration, a network of professionals, a coordinating body, and working relationships within the higher learning institutions. Our local informant also provides a better picture of the situation, discussing the enrollment trend, barriers, and support provided by professionals and non-governmental organizations. Two take away lessons from the present study are to (1) establish a network of professionals and partners to support disabled students in higher learning ecosystem; and, (2) all Malaysian higher learning institutions must provide clear and accessible information relating to policies, facilities, and services for disabled students on their websites. We also advocate for the establishment of a network for inclusive higher education agenda in the Asian region.

Key words: Disabled persons, higher education, Hong Kong SAR, inclusion, netnography.

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated for the year 2018 and 2019 that the Government of Hong Kong spends about \$113.7 billion in the education sector, which is one-fifth of total government expenditure (Government of Hong Kong 2018). This shows how much the Government of Hong Kong invests in human capital development. Seeing such a huge investment, we are curious to know whether the benefit of a significant monetary boost in the education sector also extends to bring inclusion of disabled persons in Hong Kong's higher education system. Our curiosity is beyond the issue of whether the Government of Hong Kong provides financial aid to its disabled citizens who pursue post-secondary education. Instead, we ought to learn about the structure and system which are put in place to enable full participation of disabled persons in a higher education setting, hence their inclusion.

In September 2011, only 257 new students who have identified of having an impairment enrolled into public higher learning institutions which represent around 1%, but increase in disabled student admission is expected due to growing number of local students with impairment and international students with impairment (Mitchell 2012, p. 7). The report also presents the existence of organizations within some universities in Hong Kong to cater to and support disabled students with different forms of organizational structure (Ibid, p. 37). A study by Gilson and Dymond (2012) find barriers faced by a group of disabled students in a Hong Kong university can be grouped into the themes of architecture, environment, systems, instructor- and classroom-related, student-generated and the lack of evaluation.

This paper presents findings from a preliminary netnographic study on the inclusion of disabled persons in Hong Kong's higher education system. Through this research, we hope to bring forth useful lessons to be adopted into the Malaysian higher education sector. This paper begins with an overview of the disabled people's situation in Hong Kong. Then, we present the past literature review on this topic. The next section renders the theoretical framework and the description of the methodological framework for this study. Finally, we discuss research findings by dividing it into three headings; legal analysis, website exploration, and feedback from an insider.

OVERVIEW OF DISABLED PEOPLE'S SITUATION IN HONG KONG

Let us begin with an overview of the disabled people's situation in Hong Kong. In 2012, there are about 361,300 disabled persons in Hong Kong with a disability prevalence of 5.2% (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2012). Three years later, the number increases to 578,600 disabled persons with a disability prevalence of 8.1% (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2016). This shows that the number of disabled people in Hong Kong within three years increases by about 217,300 or equivalent to 37.6%.

According to Section 2 of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance 1995 (omitted 2013), one is recognized as a disabled individual when he or she affected by at least one of the conditions quoted below:

“disability (殘疾), in relation to a person, means- (a) total or partial loss of the person's bodily or mental functions; (b) total or partial loss of a part of the person's body; (c) the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness; (d) the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing disease or illness; (e) the malfunction, malformation or

disfigurement of a part of the person's body; (f) a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction; or (g) a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behaviour, and includes a disability that- (i) presently exists; (ii) previously existed but no longer exists; (iii) may exist in the future; or (iv) is imputed to a person;"

The Government of Hong Kong SAR adopts several measures in responding to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Those measures include the enactment of several domestic laws and policies such as Disability Discrimination Ordinance, Mental Health Ordinance, Hong Kong Rehabilitation Policy and Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan, as well as financial assistance schemes (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific 2012). It is also not an exaggeration to say that Hong Kong has achieved monumental change with regards to accessibility for disabled users with the enforcement of Building Planning Regulations 2012 which also incorporates specific clauses and chapters on the provision of accessible facilities and design for disabled individuals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Let us now turn to previous studies which investigate the inclusion of disabled people in higher education. As an overview of this topic, the discussion concerning the inclusion of disabled people is viewed through many perspectives and approaches. Those perspectives and approaches include social justice, support, emancipatory praxis, and diversity approach. The most common or sometimes is the initial point of entry, which we too tend to use as part of our analysis, is the barrier analysis grounded in the Marxist tradition. The diversification of theories and methodologies brings about the birth of a rapidly developing subfield of disability studies known as disability studies in education.

There is an undoubtedly huge body of work on the inclusion of disabled persons in higher education though at the time scholars may not consciously frame their work as part of disability studies in education. We can see writings on ableism (Dolmage 2017), diversity (Kim & Aquino 2017), social justice (Evans, Broido, Brown & Wilke 2017), identity (Kerschbaum, Eisenman & Jones 2017), access and policy change (Riddell, Tinklin & Wilson 2005), and dyslexia-friendly design (Pavey, Meehan & Waugh 2010) in the higher education context.

To support disabled students in a higher learning institution, Izzo and colleagues (2001) assert the need to analyze the quality improvement cycle on services and learning experiences. They discuss three basic criteria which are campus climate, professional development, and structural change (Izzo, Hertzfeld, Simmons-Reed & Aaron 2001). To actualize the support system and inclusivity for disabled students, governments and the management board of higher learning institutions must invest in the institutional capacity building. Capacity-building should not be limited to finance and human resources, but governments and the management board of higher learning institutions must pay equal attention to practical knowledge production and utilization, technological utilization and adaptation as well as reflexive and proactive institutional change (Nasir & Efendi 2019b, p. 14).

All these lead to changing and bettering the institutional culture and climate in higher learning institutions and the higher education sector in general. However, institutional norms such as cost reduction, avoidance of legal conflict, emphasis on merit-based characteristics, persisting welfare discourse, merit-based distribution of resources, and the politics of departmental autonomy can hinder the inclusion agenda, which also affects the access, self-advocacy, and identity formation among disabled students (Riddell, Tinklin & Wilson 2005, pp. 76-77).

Despite the diversification and advancement of theories and approaches to disablement in higher education, the social model of disability remains vital in academic inquiry and advocacy. The social model of disability exposes and criticizes various forms of barriers in the higher education sector (Tugli, Klu & Morwe 2014). Yet, translating the social model of disability is difficult. Different services and policies developed and implemented in a higher learning institution may be theoretically blurred, whereas the financial arrangement and incentives for the so-called support system may heavily be influenced by the medicalization of disabled students' category of impairment (Brown & Simpson 2004).

Although the social model analysis provides a fundamental gateway to discuss the inclusion process concerning disabled students in higher education, the inquiry must and would be more fruitful when combining the barrier analysis with other theories and approaches. The integrated model of inquiry thus investigates the interaction between persons with impairment and different forms of barriers beyond the scope of negative transactional relations.

THEORIZING TRANSFORMATIVE INCLUSION FOR DISABLED PERSONS

In theorizing inclusion of disabled people, we attempt to produce a working model which combines the work of Gidley and her colleagues (2010a, 2010b) on social inclusion, Berne's disability justice framework (2015), and our work (Nasir & Efendi 2019b, 2019c). Gidley and colleagues (2010b) survey different theories and approaches to social inclusion for Australian higher education setting and they note a multifaceted challenge regarding time:

"Firstly, social inclusion interventions take time to design, implement and evaluate. The kinds of individual and social change that we are proposing here might take years, decades or even generations to unfold. Secondly, regarding community partnership, ... Thirdly, different people, groups and cultures have different senses of time. ... Sensitivity

towards such diverse time-senses is currently under-researched yet may well impact on the success of social inclusion programs.” (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler & Bereded-Samuel 2010b).

The quote above foreshadows more critical concern, that is conventional social inclusion interventions usually initiated as an “outside force” or a “foreign benevolence” comes to the fragmented and marginalized communities and conduct social re-arrangement and reconstruction. Theories, approaches, and programs that uphold social inclusion must not inject colonial assumption and framework. This, coupled with neoliberal construction of “inclusionism” indeed brings terrible effects to the lives of disabled people. The impact of neo-liberalization on disabled people’s lives have been documented by disability studies scholars (Mitchell & Snyder 2015; Mladenov 2018; Soldatic 2019).

The focus of anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal social inclusion projects also highlights other issues such as the “insider-outsider relationships”, natural and material support as well as the episteme of social inclusion. Furthermore, it is also imperative to assess the degree of inclusion which is reflected by access, participation, and success (Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler & Bereded-Samuel 2010a). As human life and experiences proceed in a continuum that can be affected by many variables and produce different outcomes, the result of social inclusion should not be commodified and treated as a static point, rather as a degree of exclusion/inclusion.

Inclusion also relates and sometimes is being equated to justice. Positing from a perspective of disabled black people’s movement, Berne (2015) underscores ten principles of disability justice. Those ten principles are (1) intersectionality; (2) leadership by disabled people; (3) an anti-capitalist politic; (4) a commitment to cross-movement organizing; (5) recognizing wholeness; (6) the crippled principle of sustainability; (7) a commitment to cross impairment solidarity; (8) interdependence; (9) collective access; and, (10) the path and goal to collective liberation. Berne conceptualizes disability justice from an advocacy and activism context, not necessarily for institutional, structural, and governmentality. Her proposal of disability justice balances between the collectiveness (within the disabled community and across other movements) and uniqueness among disabled individuals.

Berne’s proposal on disability justice principles intersect, interconnect, and work in a complementary nature with our theoretical proposals on inclusion and emancipation. First, our proposal for a transformative egalitarian politics extends Berne’s principles on the anti-capitalist politic, the crippled principle of sustainability, and collective liberation. We assert three basic characteristics of the transformative egalitarian politics: (1) Everyone has rights and needs which must be recognized, respected, and fulfilled regardless of their biological, social, cultural, economic, and geographical characteristics; (2) Everyone is interdependent, which include the relationships between humans and non-humans resulting in the establishment of a network of care; and, (3) Positive and proactive measures must be taken to abolish political, economic, social, cultural, and technological oppression to enable everyone enjoys a meaningful life (Nasir & Efendi 2019b, p. 347).

Like Berne and so many other scholars, we also emphasize on the intersectionality (Nasir & Efendi 2018, p. 29) as a framework for analysis and approach to strive against multiple forms of inequalities in society. Besides recognizing multidimensionality and shared responsibilities among different stakeholders, we also coin a concept of ‘intrapersonal needs’ which refers to “... human needs which are built on indivisible human and non-human relations ... include the universal design application on the infrastructure (e.g. traffic lights with audio signals and announcement boards with speech synthesizer), assistive device (e.g. white cane, wheelchair, and hearing aids), and the usage of service animals.” (Nasir & Efendi 2019b, p. 348).

As Berne stresses for the disabled people themselves to lead their movement and be involved in the mainstream discourse, we share a similar thought when we discuss the roles of disabled persons in nurturing disability emancipation climate (Nasir & Efendi 2019c, p. 11) which also underscores other factors such as group consciousness, group capacity, continuous engagement, good relationships, networking resources, politics of interests, and power of difference. After ruminating about the nature of inclusion of disabled people in an institution or society, based on the cumulated work and lived experiences, we pose several crucial points on this topic:

1. The theory or model of inclusion must lay out a framework which balances collectiveness and individual variations, as well as the relationships, arise between these two domains;
2. The theory or model of inclusion must explicitly point and situate in the ecology of multiple actors and institutions; individuals, social subgroups, community, private sector, other social and economic institutions, and the government. The theory or model must also inquire into the relationships within this ecological system of people;
3. The theory or model of inclusion must discuss the interplay of different tools used in the interactions (humans and non-humans) within this ecological system of people, including issues such as access, inequities, and power;
4. The theory or model of inclusion must recognize and supply proactive measures to address vulnerability and marginalization, particularly during national, transnational, and global emergencies; and lastly,
5. The theory and model of inclusion must challenge the impact of neo-liberalization and propose alternative politics and processes that positively promote and safeguard inclusion-focused society.

Considering the five critical arguments underlined above, we proffer a working model we call “a transformative model of inclusion”. Fundamentally, we define inclusion as a condition or a process in which the needs and rights of different social

subgroups in society are recognized and included without restricting or nullifying the needs and rights of certain social groups. The transformative model of inclusion stands and materializes eight principles below:

- 1) **Aware, understand, and respect diversity:** We must recognize that impairment, rare disorders, and chronic illness are part of human diversity. The recognition of impairment, rare disorders, and chronic illness as part of human variations calls for an ontological shift towards these conditions. The general public and the disabled community, particularly those who hold the traditional sense of power (e.g. policymakers, employers, etc.), must aware and understand the human needs and the broadening perspective of human rights arise from these conditions. Awareness and comprehension are the gateways to nurture respect towards this heterogeneous group of people.
- 2) **Human rights:** All humans enjoy the same human rights and this includes people with impairment and/or chronic illness. People with impairment and/or chronic illness, therefore, shall protect their dignity, exercise their autonomy, enjoy equality, and contribute to greater solidarity in non-ableist and non-disablist ways.
- 3) **Transformative equality:** As advocated by Degener (2016, pp. 17-18), transformative equality encourages proactive and positive measures in bringing institutional and structural changes, including meaningful participation in democratic processes (Hepple, 2013).
- 4) **Transformative egalitarian politics – individuals’ needs and collective benefits:** Besides the three characteristics we underlined above, we also believe in a transformative egalitarian system, all human beings have an equal footing to develop and exercise their power, being involved in all stages of political and public life. This, in turn, promotes and recognizes the leadership of disabled people and the value of their lived experiences as a vital source of knowledge.
- 5) **Universal accessibility:** Accessibility must be seen as issues affecting persons with impairment and/or chronic illness beyond the architecture and physical environment. Accessibility in its various forms (e.g. physical, technological, information, knowledge, social protection, etc.) must be an inherent part and one of the crucial topics in all policies, laws, regulations, and programs. Provisions relating to accessibility in these tools (i.e. policies, laws, regulations, and programs) must also take into account connecting aspects such as the equity and safety of vulnerable groups.
- 6) **Twin-track strategy:** We advocate for the integration of two types of twin-track strategies; enablement-empowerment and general-specific. The inclusion process must not be oversimplified to ‘just put all shapes in one box’. Inclusion is more sophisticated and requires intentness on mechanisms and systemic changes to include people with diverse needs. Both ‘enablement’ and ‘general’ focus on the actors and institution surrounding the disabled community (e.g. laws, physical design, culture, etc.), while ‘empowerment and ‘specific’ focus on the disabled community (e.g. capacity-building, special services, assistive technologies, political consciousness, etc.).
- 7) **Participation:** Though most political and public processes utilize a representational approach, we must not accept the status quo has been perfected. We must widen the space and foster necessary cultures for more direct democratic participation amongst all citizens where possible. At the same time, where the representational approach is required, the representatives must establish an effective ecosystem in which they can receive and disseminate information to their represented communities.
- 8) **Mutual ownership:** The philosophy, processes, and benefits of inclusion must be mutually owned by all citizens; the policymakers, service providers, employers, educators, the marginalized groups, and the society at large.

Also, we propose a concept of “disaggregated inclusion” as a concomitant from the transformative model of inclusion. Disaggregated inclusion embodies the eight principles above and practically translate the principles of ‘transformative egalitarian politics’ and ‘twin-track strategy’ into legal and administrative actions. Disaggregated inclusion, to put it simply, refers to the efforts to incorporate the needs and interests of marginalized groups (in this case is disabled people) as an inherent part of general provisions and at the same time recognize the need to have specific measures or thematic areas affecting the marginalized groups.

Disaggregated inclusion emerges from our consciousness that though national and societal issues affect the lives of disabled persons and their families, this social group also facing their specific barriers that most citizens are not. Failing to accept this phenomenon may result in unsystematic solutions to the inclusion of disabled persons. Disaggregated inclusion should be practiced in two important levels; the drafting phase (drafting new or amending existing laws, policies, procedures, and programs) and the implementation phase (the bureaucratic and administrative conduct of the laws, policies, procedures, and programs, including the distribution of resources and government aids).

METHODOLOGY

We use a netnographic research design as a methodological framework for this study. As the world progress to the digitalization of many parts of individual and communal life, netnography emerges as a research methodology in response to this rapidly changing culture. Kozinets (2010) writes:

“... a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today’s social worlds. In the field of consumer and marketing research, netnographies have become a widely accepted form of

research. They have been used to tackle a large variety of topics, from applied questions of online advertising to more general investigations of identity, social relations, learning, and creativity.”

In his second book, Kozinets (2015) extends the definition by writing:

“Netnography is the name given to a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices, where a significant amount of the data collected and participant observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the Internet, including mobile applications.”

As more and more information is provided and shared online around the globe, the researcher and students can now easily access that information and analyze it. The growth of internet-based technologies and other connecting devices, including accessibility-oriented devices and software for disabled researchers and students enables a new form of data collection and knowledge production.

There are three sources of data used for the present study; legal analysis, website content analysis, and email interview with a local informant. For the legal analysis, we carry out a content analysis of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance 1995 (omitted 2013) to identify relevant sections concerning education. The law is obtained from the International Labour Organization website on November 21st, 2015. We also extract data from the web page containing information on disabled students' services of five purposively-selected universities in Hong Kong. For diplomacy reasons, we shall not disclose the name of the universities. Instead, we replace the name of those universities with alphabets; University A, University B, University C, University D, and University E.

For the online interview, we conduct the interview using online platforms such as the Facebook messenger and Google mail (Gmail). The local informant is a male young activist with visual impairment in Hong Kong whom the first author has personal contact with, viz we employ purposive sampling. The online interview is conducted in March of 2018. After securing consent from the informant, the first author sends a list of questions to the local informant in a Microsoft Word file. The local informant is required to answer all questions by writing his response in the same file. At the time of the online interview is conducted, the local informant is pursuing a part-time study in a degree of counseling. He also has an associate degree in public policy and administration. He works at a Hong Kong's association established and run by blind people there, focusing on human rights advocacy in policies and facilities provision.

The following parts present the findings of this project through the three methods explained above. We divide our findings into three headings; legal analysis through the interrogation of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, exploration of support system for disabled students through selected universities' websites, and insider's feedback.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

The Hong Kong's Disability Discrimination Ordinance was first enacted in 1995 and the latest amendment was made in 2013 (E.R. 1 of 2013). At the beginning of the law, the prohibition of discrimination on the ground of impairment or being associated with persons with an impairment in the education sector is cemented as part of its long title as follows:

“An Ordinance to render unlawful discrimination against persons on the ground of their or their associates' disability in respect of their employment, accommodation, education, access to partnerships, membership of trade unions and clubs, access to premises, educational establishments, sporting activities and the provision of goods, services and facilities; to make provision against harassment and vilification of persons with a disability and their associates; to extend the jurisdiction of the Equal Opportunities Commission to include discrimination against persons on the ground of their or their associates' disability, and for connected purposes.”

The law consists of nine major parts, eighty-eight sections, and six schedules. Protection of the right of disabled people in education is protected by section 24 of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance 1995 (omitted 2013). Under the subsection (1), the educational establishments are legally prohibited from refusing, or failing to accept, or accentuate discriminatory terms and conditions to accept admission application by disabled persons. Disabled students are also protected in relation to their access to benefits, services, and facilities provided by the educational establishment. Subsection (2) of section 24 also recognizes dismissal or other forms of hardship as discrimination. However, there are several exceptions.

First, according to subsection (3), one is not considered of being discriminated against if he or she is not accepted in a school or educational institution established specifically for persons with a certain impairment which the person does not have. Sections on discrimination against disabled people in education are not applicable if the disabled student, when admitted to the educational institution, will require services or facilities that are not needed by non-disabled students and cause an unjustifiable burden on the educational institution. Finally, sections on discrimination against disabled people are not applicable in the situation where: (1) the disabled person does not have the reasonable capability to perform actions or activities which are reasonably required of the students in that educational establishment, or (b) the disabled person is selected through selection method which reasonably based on skills or abilities to perform actions and activities required.

Section 27 lists a number of examples regarding facilities and services. One of them is the facilities of education which include the conduct of public examinations. As provided by section 37, disabled students or disabled persons who soon-to-be students in an educational establishment are legally protected from being harassed by existing students, staff, or members of the

management body. The same protection also covers disabled staff and disabled members in the management body of an educational institution. Section 50, on the other hand, allows affirmative actions to be taken in the forms of goods, services, facilities, opportunities, benefits, grants, and programs to meet the needs of disabled people in education among other aspects.

The Disability Discrimination Ordinance focuses majorly on acts of discrimination and harassment. Though this law captures one of the principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, namely the non-discrimination, the law does not supply fundamental provisions on reasonable accommodation in an education setting (physical and non-physical components). We also feel the phrase ‘reasonably capable’ used in paragraph (a) under subsection (5) of section 24 may imperil disabled persons’ enrollment into non-traditional fields due to ableist/disablist norms of certain fields of knowledge and professions. On this matter, we question:

“... whether certain impairment really limits those who have it to enter certain fields. ... whether we should conduct the modification process on disabled persons in order for them to be eligible and able to undertake certain fields, or should we modify the course to suit disabled persons’ capabilities as well as providing appropriate support system. The former classically reflect the medical model of disability, while the latter translate the social model of disability. Notwithstanding such breakthrough thinking is highly commendable, we still need to do a lot of reconstruction, both in material and philosophical aspects ...” (Nasir & Efendi 2019a).

WEBSITE EXPLORATION

We investigate the web page of disabled student services on the selected universities to inquire about the following questions: (a) What services do these universities provide for disabled students? (b) Does the disabled student need to register or disclose their impairment? (c) Do these universities provide information relating to policies on disabled students’ affairs? (d) Is there any information relating to structure or body of governance for disabled students’ affairs? The following subsections explain the above-mentioned aspects of the selected universities.

University A

University A provides a range of services for students such as reasonable academic adjustments, individual study skills coaching, note-taking assistance, library support, employment support, counseling support, and residential services. University A also provides specific links on information on support for different types of impairment. There are four major groups; physical and sensory impairment, learning disabilities, mental health problems, and other impairments. Students who require reasonable academic adjustments must register, but the registration is voluntary. Disabled students can also withdraw at any time. Registration form is provided online and students can also request alternative methods for registration.

Registration must be renewed every year and each student will be assigned to a case manager. The case managers are the focal person in arranging and supporting disabled students in University A. University A also provides infographics on various topics relating to supporting students with various types of impairment and campus accessibility, including transportation. The web page also contains contact information if disabled students require urgent accessibility assistance. University A also provides an assistive technology loan to eligible students. Disabled students can also enjoy internship placement at organization partners.

The web page also provides information on funding and scholarships for disabled students. Moreover, there is also funding for student-led activities that promote social inclusion. There are also social inclusion projects to support persons with mental health problems and providing accessible entertainment for people with learning disabilities featured on the web page. From our analysis of the web page, it seems there is a unit under a larger center in University A charged with managing disabled students’ affairs. It is also evident the unit has close working relationships with other entities within and outside the university. A peer support network is also established.

University B

University B provides services such as academic accommodation, special facilities, transportation, career preparation, and counseling services to disabled students. To get reasonable accommodation needed, the students must fill up and submit a declaration form. The web page also provides information on the location of accessible facilities and paths throughout the university. The web page also lists all scholarships provided by external donors besides financial aid allocated by the university. Disabled students in University B are also given information relating to internship opportunities.

University B also encourages the inclusion of disabled students via four major initiatives; programs for disabled students, inclusion ambassador, awareness-raising, and innovations. Besides the SEN officer, there is also a peer support network to assist disabled students. Disabled students can also easily contact the SEN officer using the contact details provided on the web page. It seems University B at least has a unit or officer charged with managing disabled students’ affairs. Information from the site also suggests that the SEN officer liaises with many parties in providing appropriate support to disabled students.

University C

In University C, disabled students who require support must contact the disability services manager. Disabled students can access a variety of support services such as learning support, residential and transportation services, financial assistance, accessibility, counseling and other general services provided to all students. Disabled students must register and apply for the support required through the web page. The web page also contains a link to the policy on equal opportunity enforced by University C. The site also connects visitors to other useful resources such as online training and publications.

Besides the unit charged with managing disabled students' affairs located under a larger office, there is also a committee that coordinates services for disabled students. University C also create a team of volunteers among non-disabled students to support their disabled counterparts.

University D

Disabled students in University D must also register for them to apply for reasonable adjustments needed for their learning and other support. The registration form is provided online. The contact details of person-in-charged are also provided to students. From the information obtained, it seems University D does not have a dedicated unit or officers catering to disabled students' affairs. However, the center charged with registering and supporting disabled students does liaise with other entities within the university for proper support. There is also a committee on equal opportunities which outlines a range of services for disabled students in University D.

University E

University E explicitly mentions zero tolerance to discrimination against disabled students and links the university's mission statement to the Disability Discrimination Ordinance among other laws. Disabled students are also encouraged to disclose their impairment to SEN support. Besides the SEN support located under a center, University E also establishes a working group which is responsible to (1) Oversee funded projects on the support for disabled students; (2) Promote awareness of equal opportunities of disabled students; (3) Assess and review the current support for disabled students; (4) Identify existing policies that related to disabled students and make recommendations for change where needed; (5) Plan programs and activities to enhance support to and integration of disabled students.

FEEDBACK FROM AN INSIDER

Initially, we want to know whether, in Hong Kong, there is a government department or unit dedicated to the affairs of the disabled university and college students. According to the local informant, higher learning institutions there can receive support from the University Grants Committee (UGC), but there is no specific department to cater for disabled university and college students. Besides that, the local informant also informs us that there is no special law and action plan which promotes the inclusion of disabled persons in Hong Kong's higher education sector. Even so, there is a scholarship for disabled students to pursue tertiary education such as the Sir Edward Youde Memorial Fund. Other than government-owned universities, the local informant also describes the existence of private higher learning institutions which are monitored by the Education Bureau as well as a national council for vocational training.

When we ask about his perception of the enrollment trend of disabled people to higher education in Hong Kong, the local informant notes that there is an increasing admission of disabled persons.

“Yes! It is because most of the students realized that Education is very important for their life, as the opportunity for employment will be higher.” (Local informant email response, 23 March 2018)

The local informant also shares that most common disabled students enrolled in fields such as language and social sciences. It seems there may be some similarities between the situation of disabled students in Malaysia and Hong Kong. Even though admittedly higher education offers an opportunity for personal and professional development, disabled university and college students in Hong Kong have to grapple with various forms of obstacles of their own.

“The most important thing is, the students can have nice support, including accessing the information and the venue. Also, the students have the same opportunity to participate in the program. The difficulties are the students cannot have the references, because the hard copy and some [of] the databases may not be so accessible. During the group projects, ... [non-disabled] students worry to have the groupmate is disabled... cause they [non-disabled] don't much understand the ability of them [the disabled students].” (Local informant email response, 23 March 2018)

Parity of access and participation in the areas of social interaction and learning experience remains problematic for disabled students in higher education. This situation confirms the barriers to learning as pointed out in other studies (Fuller, Healey, Bradley & Hall 2004; Hall, Healey & Harrison 2004; Healey, Fuller, Bradley & Hall 2006; Mitchell 2012; Shevlin, Kenny & Mcneela 2004). Moreover, there are some interesting facts on the network of support for disabled university and college students in Hong Kong. Professionals, as pointed out in the previous heading on website exploration, alongside non-governmental organizations, perform certain roles.

“The social worker will help the students to coordinate most of the arrangements, and link up with other students or helpers. At the same time, the lecturers may know they should communicate with them [disabled students]. The NGO [non-governmental organizations], will provide different kinds of services ... borrowing equipment, translation on the accessible copies, social activities, and career planning.” (Local informant email response, 23 March 2018)

DISCUSSION

Findings from the legal analysis, website exploration, and online interview show the inclusion agenda of disabled students in the higher education sector is happening at different levels; the government, universities, and civil society. We can also see a variety of person-to-person and person-to-institution interactions; disabled students, support service officers, non-disabled students, scholarship providers, and non-governmental organizations. Besides that, different tools are being used in these complex relationships; legislation, websites, scholarship, professional services, technological aids, and so forth.

The adoption of the transformative model of inclusion, in our opinion, can create a network of care that safeguards the power and benefits to disabled persons in a higher learning environment. The practice of disaggregated inclusion, for example, ensures the needs and interests of disabled people in national laws and policies, action plans, and programs are being included, both in the form of inherent universal provisions and specific chapters or clauses. Inclusion is not to lump everyone into an environment, or in this case in a university, without putting proper mechanisms in place. Inclusion should not be tokenistic in nature or operationalized in a merit-based achievement.

The transformative model of inclusion presented above, though maybe grandiose in philosophical and its undertaking, genuinely emphasizes the need to take proactive and positive measures to realize the inclusivity of disabled persons. We re-orientate the philosophy and praxis for inclusion moving away from the fascination with mere 'negative transactional relations' and moving towards transformative orthodoxy.

CONCLUSION

Hong Kong presents a fascinating case study on the inclusion of disabled persons in the higher education system. From a system point of view, Hong Kong shows great progress with the enforcement of Disability Discrimination Ordinance and the establishment of a disability service unit at universities. Interestingly, social workers, aside from non-governmental organizations, have a significant role in supporting disabled students in higher learning institutions. However, disabled students in this country share the same attitudinal and information barriers as pointed out in many previous studies in the area.

Findings from this case study underscore several good recommendations to be adopted in the Malaysian setting. Of course, appropriate contextualization into the local situation undoubtedly is needed. Nevertheless, the Malaysian government and Malaysian higher learning institutions can adopt the following actions:

1. Create a network of professionals and organizations to support academic and social adjustments of disabled students in higher learning ecosystem; and,
2. All Malaysian higher learning institutions must provide clear and accessible information relating to policies, facilities, and services for disabled students on their websites.

We also want to put forth a proposal to establish a network of experts, academicians, and student activists to mainstream inclusivity in the Asian higher education system. Taking the example of the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) and Education International (EI), it is time to have such an organization for the Asian region. Through this organization, different countries from different subregions can share best practices, discuss common issues and current trends as well as advocate and consult on inclusive higher education to governments and related stakeholders. We also feel optimistic that with this organization, we can nurture database on disabled people and their issues in the higher education sector, providing the very much needed evidence which continues to be scarce in this region.

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