DISABLED STUDENTS HOPE FOR TAILOR-MADE FACILITIES

by Vivian Li

Universities in Hong Kong have been providing facilities and services for disabled students. However, according to the real life experiences of some disabled students, they think that such facilities could be more tailor-made to them.

Jason Ho Ka-leung, a visually-impaired social work student in the University of Hong Kong (HKU), has been an active student since secondary school. He is now the committee member of Starr Hall of HKU and choir member of the university.

Recalling the reason choosing HKU, Ho said that the facilities and services provided for the disabled were not his major considerations. “I was attracted by HKU's fascinating hall life.”

“Disabled students do not need special treatments, they only need people to treat them equally.”

However, the design of the campus and the availability of disabled-friendly facilities affected how Yip Kin-keung, a wheelchair-bound social work student in the City University of Hong Kong (City U) chose the universities. Yip said he preferred City U to the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and the HKU mainly because of its campus landscape.

He said sometimes the university would recruit student volunteers to help him scan textbooks into the computer. However, the response from students was not positive. Instead, he now pays to hire student helpers to scan textbooks.

Ho was satisfied with most of the disabled-friendly facilities in HKU. He said that nearly every lift in the campus has press buttons with Braille. But there is still room for improvement. He said as most lifts did not install a speech synthesizer, he was not notified which floor he had reached.

He also said the specially-guided path provided no shortcut for the disabled students and so he had to walk a longer way to his destination through the path.

“Unlike the CUHK and HKU, the buildings in City U are more concentrated. I don’t have to move around between lessons. Also, I don’t have to worry about rainy days as most area of the campus is indoor,” he said.

Yip is satisfied with the general services provided by the university for disabled students and its efficiency in responding to students' needs, but he said there was room for improvement.

“The are not many automatic doors installed inside campus. Nearly every lecture theatre’s entrance and lift entrance are installed with one-way doors. It is very difficult to open the door by myself,” he said.

Ho added that it would be better to assign a parking area for wheelchairs inside the lecture theatres as he always found himself blocking the aisle.

When asked about his most unforgettable experience, Yip said it took four male classmates to carry him up 200 steps from the barbecue site to his dormitory.

In CUHK, even though most of the buildings in the school are provided with disabled-friendly facilities, some places are not accessible for disabled students when they are on their own due to its hilly topography.

One of the major difficulties for them is to shuttle among classrooms which are scattered away. Other students take shuttle bus to move around. Meanwhile, CUHK provides rehabilitation bus services for physically-disabled students.

The service is provided on reservation basis. However, not all disabled students are eligible for using the rehabilitation bus. The eligibility depends on their degree of disability. First priority will be given to permanently disabled students certified by the Disability Service Coordinator on academic related activities.

Although rehabilitation bus may make the disabled students' campus life easier, there are still some constraints.

As a user of the service, Tam Chor-wing, a year-two biochemistry student who is suffering from dwarfism, is worried that the rehabilitation bus service might not be able to support the increasing number of users in future.

Yu Tang-fei, another wheelchair-bound mathematic student was less fortunate than Lui when he missed the rehabilitation bus. Once he needed to go to the railway station on his own.

“Up to now, there is only one rehabilitation bus running inside the campus. It is difficult to coordinate the schedules of all disabled students, since we are having lessons in different colleges,” she said.

Besides the tight schedule, the rehabilitation bus service ends at 6:15 p.m. every day, causing inconvenience to those students who have late classes.

Jennifer Lui Wai-cheung, a wheelchair-bound medicine student, had the experience of missing the last shift of the rehabilitation bus.

“I had to ask my classmates to assist me to go all the way up to United College from the Main Campus because it is very hard for me to climb uphill on my wheelchair by myself,” she said.
Efforts made to enable the disabled

Text and Photos by Vivian Li

Whether or not the universities could create a barrier-free environment for disabled students all depends on the universities’ initiatives and efforts, said a principal of a school for physically-handicapped students.

Wong Yuen-bing, principal of the John F. Kennedy Centre, a subsidized school for disabled children, is also concerned that disabled students enrolled into these programmes at universities might not enjoy the same facilities as disabled undergraduates.

“Universities treat these groups of disabled students very differently when compared with their undergraduates. They are left unattended with no special facilities or support provided for them,” she said.

Ms Wong said these students deserve the same facilities of attention and concern as disabled undergraduates.

“Although they are not admitted into undergraduate programmes, it is hard enough for them to reach this level with physical disabilities,” she said.

Few complaints from disabled students

The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in Hong Kong is carrying out the Formal Investigation on Accessibility in certain Publicly Accessible Premises. Since June this year, the EOC has inspected 60 public premises such as public housing estates and government offices for their disabled-friendly facilities. Although local universities, which are not government premises, are not inspected, the EOC welcomes disabled students to make complaints if they have been discriminated in any aspect.

The Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) states that unless it imposes unjustifiable hardship on the educational establishment, it is unlawful for schools to discriminate against a person with a disability, including denying or limiting student’s access to any benefit, service or facility provided by the educational establishment.

From 1996 till 2007 October, the Commission has received 108 complaints under the Ordinance concerning educational establishments in Hong Kong. Among them, 21 complaints were related to universities. The complaints were about the universities’ facilities, students’ admission or methods of teaching which the disabled students were uncomfortable with.

Having experienced inconvenience in studying and living on the campuses, the disabled students whom Varsity interviewed did not lodge any complaint to the EOC.

In 2004, 121 disabled undergraduates were admitted into UGC-funded institutions. Number of disabled students enrolled into UGC-funded institutions has increased from 121 in 2004 to 148 in 2006.

As some universities have launched associate degree or higher diploma programmes, Wong Yuen-bing, principal from the John F. Kennedy Centre, a subsidized school for disabled children, is also concerned that disabled students enrolled into these programmes at universities might not enjoy the same facilities as disabled undergraduates.

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Similar services are provided for disabled students in other universities. Yip Kin-keung, the wheelchair-bound student is grateful for City University of Hong Kong (City U) providing dormitory space for his mother to look after him. He now lives with her in a postgraduate dormitory; the room with a disabled toilet is larger than a comparable one in an undergraduate dormitory.

Yip was also impressed by the efficiency of City U in handling complaints. When he first moved into his dormitory, he complained to the school that there was no slope for him to get onto the pedestrian walk outside the dormitory. To his surprise, the school constructed a slope at his convenience within a week.
“If they (universities) use common sense and open-mindedness to understand the needs of these students, they can create a barrier-free environment for them.”

University of Hong Kong (CUHK) are attended by the Disability Services Co-ordinating Committee, which was established in 1988 to advise the University on all aspects of the provision of services for disabled persons.

Tam Chor-wing, disabled student of CUHK recalled how she received immediate attention after her admission. "The Disability Service Co-ordinating Committee contacted me on the registration day. Then, my own department and the general office of United College also contacted me to see if I had special needs," she said. She was quite surprised at the tailor-made service provided for her.

On top of access facilities and counselling services, some universities encourage other students to help the disabled students.

Sham So-lin from Communication and Public Relation Office of Hong Kong Baptist University said apart from contacting every disabled student regularly to get better understanding of their needs, the university would recruit student volunteers to provide day-to-day assistance to the disabled students.

The University of Hong Kong (HKU) has the Disability Awareness Network, which students who are interested in disability issues are welcome to join. Mrs Sylvia Wong, the assistant student affairs officer of Centre of Development and Resource for students (CEDARS) which is HKU’s special unit to dedicate the services to the disabled students, said the network was an informal gathering. Last year, it distributed some leaflets on tips about how students can help their disabled classmates share university life.

Mrs Wong said CEDARS would also assist disabled students in career guidance and job search. Each year, CEDARS would contact these large corporations for any job vacancies and ask individual disabled student to apply for the jobs. Last year, three students were recruited by UBS, the Swiss investment bank, as interns.

Rebecca Lai, executive coordinator of University Grants Committee (UGC) Secretariat said over the past 10 years, a total of about a hundred million dollars has been given to UGC-funded institutions only to carry out improvement works to the existing facilities in the campuses for the disabled. Other expenses for developing disabled-friendly facilities and services are incorporated into the annual expense of Capital Works Programme and Alterations, Additions, Repairs and Improvements (AA&I) projects of universities.

The funding is allocated according to the respective needs of different universities, since each university has a different number of students and scale of operation. The amount of funding is decided upon the proposal submitted by universities.

It is compulsory for all freshmen in CUHK to take physical education classes. In order to allow disabled students to take part in physical activities as well, CUHK has provided special physical education (SPE) lessons for them since 1988.

Chan Tak-yau, the only instructor of SPE lesson, said the activities were based on the students’ needs and physical abilities. Chinese billiard, stretching exercise with dumbbell, lawn bowling, cricket and gymnastics are taught. Besides, students are encouraged to share their talents with their classmates. For instance, a student once taught “Chikung” (breath control exercise) in class. Instead of having regular PE examination, disabled students only have to hand in written assignment for SPE assessment.

Chan said that the course has helped disabled students keep the habit of doing exercise. He is glad that these lessons enable the disabled students to gather together and become friends that can support and help each other.

Tam Chor-wing, a disabled biochemistry student in CUHK, said that the SPE lessons were quite enjoyable. He said the lessons gave disabled students a chance to gather around and have some physical exercise.

Special Examination Arrangements

Some universities accommodate disabled students for examination with special arrangement. City University of Hong Kong, for example, offers the social work student Yip Kin-keung, whose body below chest cannot move, to take all the examinations in the school library with special tools to type on the computer.

"Since my fingers are not nimble enough and my hands can only move in a limited extent, two pen-like tools are attached on my hands for typing words," said Yip.

Unlike other classmates, he is supervised by an examiner in every examination. The examination time allowed is also extended. He said he sometimes felt more stressed because there was always someone looking at him during examinations.

The University of Hong Kong (HKU) offers Jason Ho ka-keung, the visually-impaired student, special examination arrangement. He said that the Examination Unit of HKU would contact the Hong Kong Society for the Blind to arrange examination papers in Braille. He said he usually took his examinations by using computer in a special room under a tutor’s supervision.