

Research on Misconceptions of the Visually Impaired by the General Public

Report

1. Introduction

Hong Kong Blind Union (HKBU) was established in 1964. It is the first self-help group organized and managed by people with visual impairment. It aims at promoting the spirit of self-help and mutual-help as well as striving for equality, opportunities and independence for visually impaired persons. Public education has always been one of the main work focuses, to let the public have better understanding of the abilities and daily lives of people with visual impairment and promoting bonds among our society and the spirit of ‘Equality, Opportunities and Independence’ through these public activities.

Many people in society still hold stereotypical concepts towards visually impaired people. Misconceptions can cause embarrassments, and discrimination can cause tragedies. Regarding to this situation, we have started this research to find out the most common misconceptions of the general public towards visually impaired persons, and to clarify these misconceptions. Results will be published and public education talks will be held to let the general public understand more about the abilities of the visually impaired, so as to eliminate discrimination. This project is supported by “The Funding Programme of Research Projects on Equal Opportunities 2013-14” of the Equal Opportunities Commission¹.

2. Research Background

HKBU has worked towards public education to clear misconceptions of the public of the abilities and needs of the visually impaired. However, many people in society still hold stereotypical concepts towards visually impaired people, probably due to traditional thinking or inaccurate information from the media. These stereotypes include: the visually impaired need to rely on others for everything, even eating and using the washroom; they lock themselves at home idle; some people even think that visually impaired people can only choose jobs like massaging, fortune telling or being a telephone operator.

Misconceptions can cause embarrassments, and discrimination can cause tragedies. In 2012, a young woman was touched by a blind person’s white cane. Later, she criticized the blind person harshly on social media, saying that she would gain bad luck for being

¹ Research Funding Programme provided by the Equal Opportunities Commission
http://www.eoc.org.hk/eoc/Upload/UserFiles/File/Funding%20Programme/policy/1314/RFP_201314_FundedResearchProjects.pdf

touched by the cane.² In the same year, an MTR staff member required a blind person with a guide dog to “wear a sign that proves that he is a blind person” to enter the MTR, because “he did not look like a blind person.”³ In 2011, a visually impaired person checked in at the airport but was rejected from boarding alone for safety reasons.⁴ A lot of times, discrimination is caused by the public’s misunderstanding of the real abilities of the visually impaired. The Disability Discrimination Ordinance was published and has been implemented in Hong Kong since 1996. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has also been in effect in Hong Kong since 2008. The introduction of these ordinances has seen the public’s growing acceptance of disabled persons.⁵ However, according to the annual report of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) 2012/2013, 56% (396 cases) out of all 710 investigated cases were disability discrimination cases. This reflected that the problem of disability discrimination is still serious. The EOC’s Baseline Questionnaire on Public Attitudes towards Persons with Disability 2010 discovered that more than 50% of interviewees believed if a person has a form of disability, they will have some forms of incapability or dependence on others. About 30% of interviewees believed that persons with disabilities would not be able to lead a happy and fulfilling life. However, most interviewees have little contact with disabled persons, and their views are not, in fact, supported by personal experiences. Therefore, the Report suggests that the government should formulate promotion channels to educate the general public, to make known the needs and rights of persons with disabilities, and to correct the general public’s negative assumptions and stereotypes.⁶

3. Purpose of Research

The survey will try to find out 10 most common misconceptions of the general public towards visually impaired persons, and to clarify these misconceptions. Results will be published and public education talks will be held to let the general public understand more about the abilities of the visually impaired, so as to eliminate discrimination. The research also puts forward suggestions towards the current situation, on how to reflect the rights and needs of the visually impaired, and promote the rights of the disabled to equally participate in society.

² Hong Kong Girl Insults Blind Person on Facebook 〈港女 fb 辱罵失明人遭圍攻〉, Oriental Daily, 13 May, 2012.

³ Station Officer Requires Signage to Distinguish 〈站長要求掛牌識別〉, Apple Daily, 22 October, 2012

⁴ Blind Person Files Complaint for Discrimination when Boarding 〈搭機受歧視 失明人投訴〉, Oriental Daily, 6 May, 2011

⁵ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities applicable to Hong Kong
http://www.lwb.gov.hk/UNCRPD/Publications/22072008_e.pdf

⁶ Baseline Questionnaire on Public Attitudes towards Persons with a Disability 2010
[http://www.eoc.org.hk/EOC/Upload/UserFiles/File/ResearchReport/201109/DisabilityReport\(eng\).pdf](http://www.eoc.org.hk/EOC/Upload/UserFiles/File/ResearchReport/201109/DisabilityReport(eng).pdf)

4. Key concepts

Visual impairment:

In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan set up by the Labour and Welfare Bureau, in Chapter 2 “Rehabilitation Services”, defines blindness according to a persons’ visual abilities in two categories: total blindness and low vision:⁷

(a) Total Blindness: persons with no visual function, i.e. no light perception.

(b) Low vision:

Severe low vision- persons with visual acuity (refers to the visual acuity of the better eye with correcting glasses) of 6/120 or worse and persons with constricted visual field in which the widest field diameter subtends an angular subtense of 20 degrees or less, irrespective of the visual acuity;

Moderate low vision- persons with visual acuity from 6/60 to better than 6/120; and

Mild low vision- persons with visual acuity from 6/18 to better than 6/60.

According to such definition, the visually impaired generally refers to people with deficiency in their visual abilities. The difference of this ability within the visually impaired community can be very big. Therefore, there is no specific image, characteristics or personality that is common among visually impaired persons. Every visually impaired person is an independent entity, each with their own characteristics and preferences. The public should not use the same attitude and way to look at all visually impaired persons.

Misconception:

According to “Ciyuan”, the word “misconception” can be defined as “a wrong understanding”. The dictionary edited by the Ministry of Education, Republic of China (Taiwan) defines “misconception” as “a wrong understanding, a wrong judgment” or “an incorrect view or opinion. The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, a misconception is “an incorrect concept” formed when “someone does not understand a situation correctly”.

⁷ Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan Chapter 2: Rehabilitation Services
<http://www.lwb.gov.hk/download/committees/rac/rpp/report/eng/Chapter2a.pdf>

Disability discrimination:

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “discrimination” is “the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, sex, or physical conditions”. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines discrimination on the basis of disability” as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of disability which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. It includes all forms of discrimination, including denial of reasonable accommodation.”⁸ In Hong Kong, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance states that a person discriminates against another if “on the ground of that other person's disability he treats him less favorably than he treats or would treat a person without a disability.”⁹

⁸ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities applicable to Hong Kong Article 2 - Definitions
“Discrimination on the basis of disability” http://www.lwb.gov.hk/UNCRPD/Publications/22072008_e.pdf

⁹ Disability Discrimination Ordinance Section 6 “Discrimination against persons with disability, etc.”
[http://www.legislation.gov.hk/blis_pdf.nsf/4f0db701c6c25d4a4825755c00352e35/D72F7A7DE6892EEE482575EF000ED92F/\\$FILE/CAP_487_e_b5.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.hk/blis_pdf.nsf/4f0db701c6c25d4a4825755c00352e35/D72F7A7DE6892EEE482575EF000ED92F/$FILE/CAP_487_e_b5.pdf)

5. Research methods

This research is conducted by means of a questionnaire. Quantitative data is collected to find out the common misconceptions of the public towards visually impaired persons. The targets of the study are persons aged 12 or above.

Questionnaire design

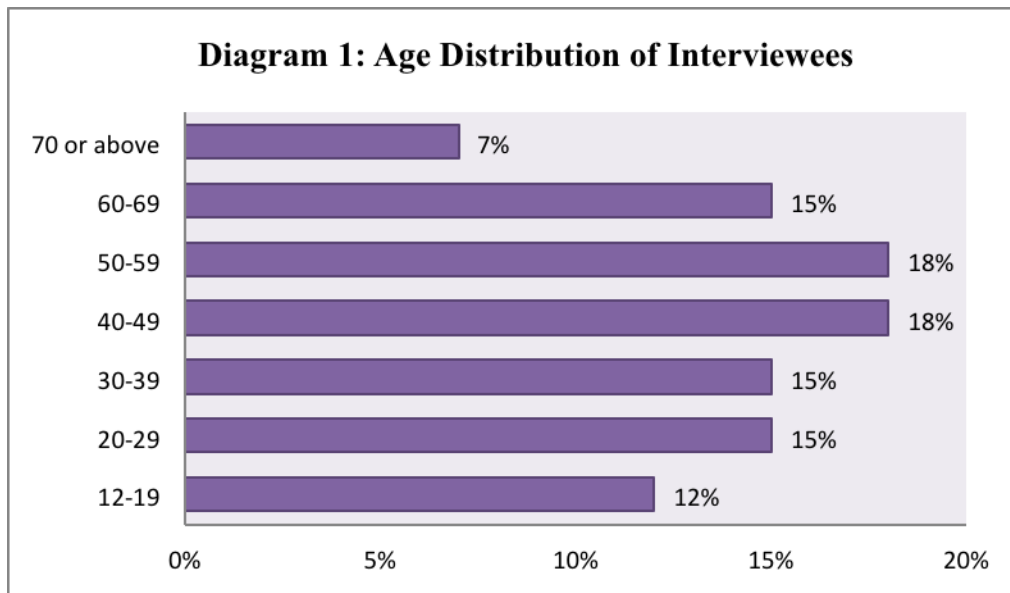
The research team first invited 12 persons with visual impairments to participate in two focus groups. Personal experiences with misunderstanding and discrimination were shared. All participants stated that, although the Disability Discrimination Ordinance was published and implemented since 1996, which reduced obvious discrimination towards visually impaired persons, some misconceptions are still deeply rooted in the minds of the public. Misconceptions towards the abilities of visually impaired persons are especially serious, affecting their daily lives and employment opportunities. Participants believed that public education needs to be strengthened to allow the general public to understand more deeply the situations and abilities of the visually impaired. In the discussions of the two focus groups, participants raised many misconceptions the general public have had. HKBU concluded 47 descriptions of these misconceptions, adding 6 descriptions of the public's level of acceptance towards the visually impaired, so as to design a questionnaire with 53 close-ended questions. Additionally, the second part of the questionnaire is about the interviewee's background information. To test the validity of the questionnaire, researchers conducted a pilot test, inviting 5 people from the public to participate and comment on the questionnaire.

The research was conducted from January to March, 2014. The research team set up booths on the streets in different districts of Hong Kong, distributing questionnaires randomly. The team collected 596 valid completed questionnaires. Since the age of interviewees were not distributed in representing that of the Hong Kong population, the data had been weighted before they were processed.

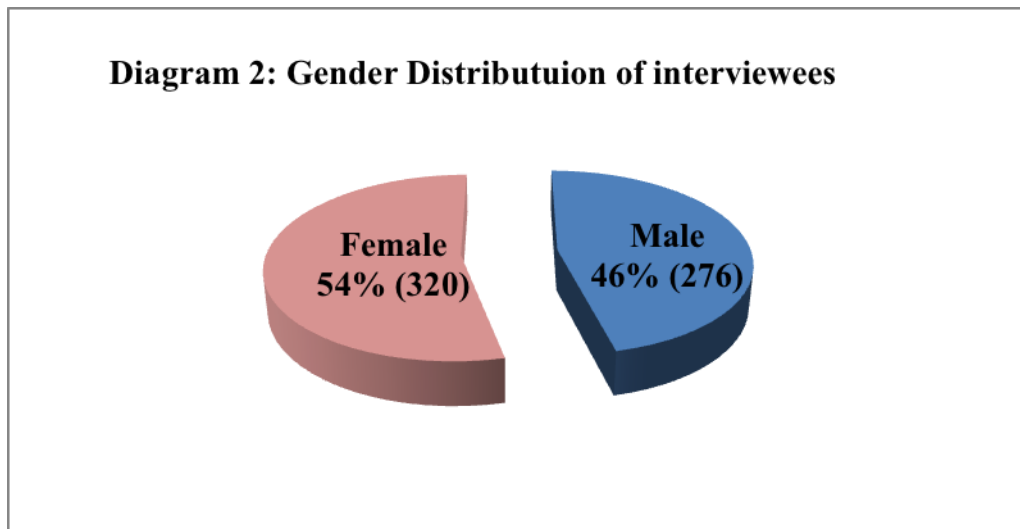
Interviewees were invited to grade the level of their agreement with descriptions of common misconceptions. The options are: 1 for "strongly agree", 2 for "agree", 3 for "not sure", 4 for "disagree" and 5 for "strongly disagree". Because all 47 questions were incorrect descriptions of the image, abilities and conditions of visually impaired persons, once "strongly agree", "agree" and "not sure" were chosen, it can be concluded that the interviewees had a misconception about that certain situation.

6. Background of interviewees

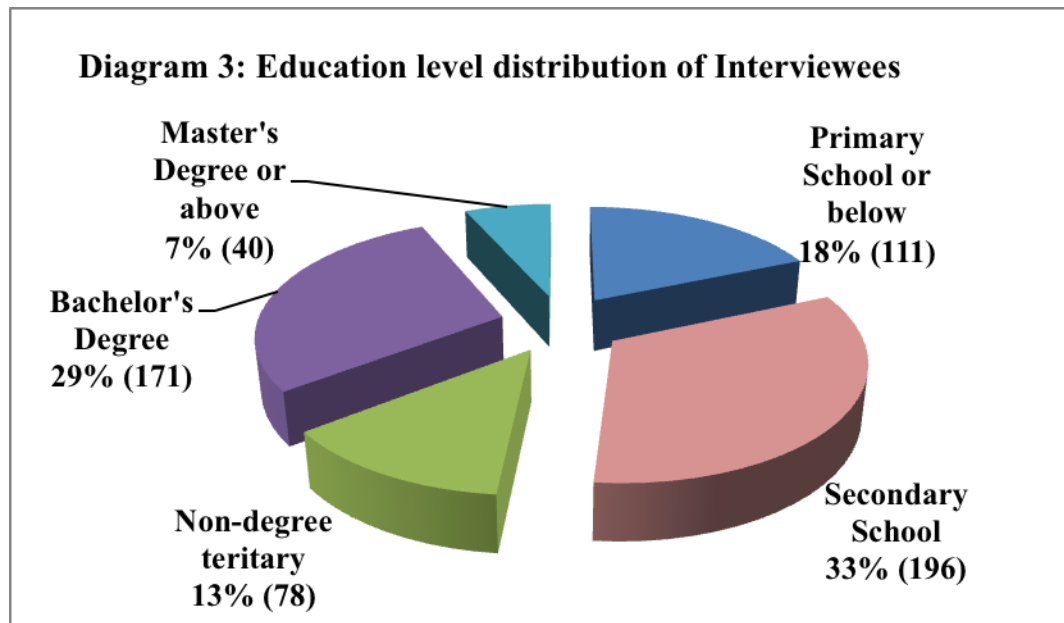
The age of interviewees are distributed as the following: 12-19 (12%), 30-39(15%), 40-49(18%) , 50-59 (18%), 60-69 (15%) and 70 (7%). (See Diagram 1)



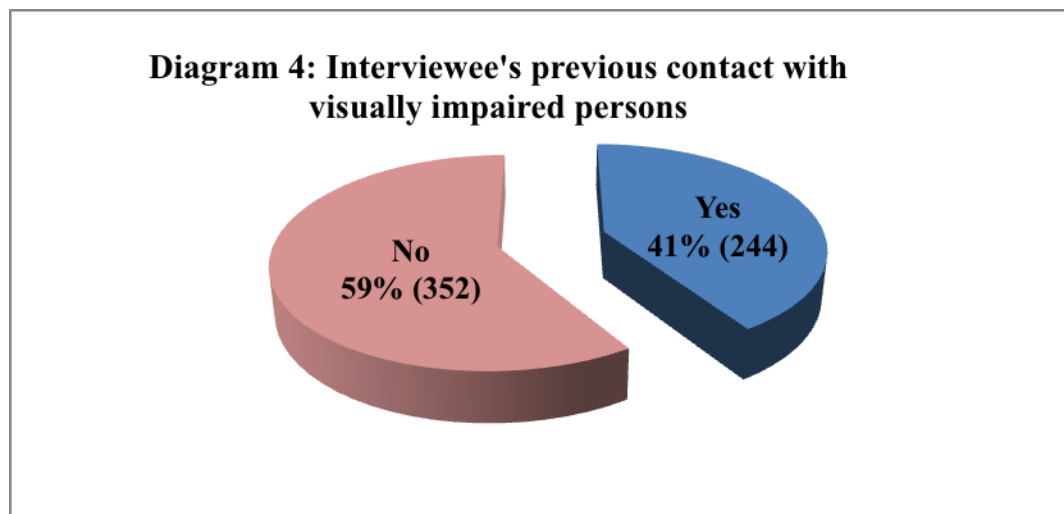
Gender distribution of interviewees is: male (276, 46.3%), female (320, 53.7%) (See Diagram 2)



Education level of interviewees is: primary school or below (111, 18%), secondary school (196, 33%), non-degree tertiary or equivalent (78, 13%), bachelor's degree (171, 29%), master's degree or above (40, 7%). (See Diagram 3)



Previous contact with visually impaired persons: Yes (244, 41%), No (352, 59%) (See Diagram 4)



7. Research findings

[Common misconceptions of visually impaired persons by the general public]

For the 47 descriptions of misconceptions, the overall average score of all interviewees is 3.53. Therefore, descriptions with scores lower than 3.53 represents that more interviewees agree with the description. A total of 25 descriptions have scores lower than 3.53. (See Table 1)

[Table 1]: Common misconceptions of visually impaired persons by the general public

Description of misconception	Average Score
Have more sensitive hearing compared with sighted persons	2.36
Use specially-manufactured computers and mobile phones	2.60
Are more musical than sighted persons	2.70
Usually wear sunglasses	2.85
Must enroll in special schools for the visually impaired	2.90
Must use canes in order to walk	3.00
Are more suitable for jobs like massage and telephone operation	3.10
Cannot travel alone, can only join travel tours	3.20
Have eyes with weird appearances	3.17
Are more prone to danger than sighted people when outside at night.	3.20
Cannot study science because of the inability to conduct experiments.	3.20
Are poor and needy of the help and mercy of sighted people.	3.30
Cannot sign and need to use stamps or fingerprints to replace signature	3.30
Need to be taken care of in daily lives	3.30
Are unable to operate ATMs	3.30
Do not watch television	3.40
Are unable to distinguish different styles of clothing on their own	3.40
Must make physical contact when talk with another person	3.43
Are unable to travel on airplane alone	3.40
Are likely to be cheated	3.40
Must walk on guided paths	3.50
Are unable to identify different bank notes	3.50
Recognize people by touching their faces	3.52
Cannot open their eyes	3.52

Most interviewees showed agreement with 10 descriptions, in descending order: “have more sensitive hearing compared with sighted persons” (85.7%); “are more musical than sighted persons” (83.5%); “use specially-manufactured computers and mobile phones” (80.5%); “must enroll in special schools for the visually impaired” (67.6%); “usually wear sunglasses” (64.6%), “must use canes in order to walk” (62.7%), “are more suitable for jobs like massage and telephone operation” (57.8%), “have eyes with weird appearances” (55.9%), “are more prone to danger than sighted people when outside at night.” (55.3%), and “are poor and needy of the help and mercy of sighted people.” (42.4%) respectively (See Table 2).

[Table 2]: the 10 most common misconceptions of visually impaired persons by the general public

Description of Misconception	Strongly agree and Agree	%	Not Sure	%	Total	%
Have more sensitive hearing compared with sighted persons	411	69.0%	100	16.7%	511	85.7%
Are more musical than sighted persons	248	41.7%	250	41.9%	498	83.5%
Use specially-manufactured computers and mobile phones	335	56.3%	144	24.2%	480	80.5%
Must enroll in special schools for the visually impaired	279	46.9%	124	20.8%	403	67.6%
Usually wear sunglasses	292	49.0%	93	15.6%	385	64.6%
Must use canes in order to walk	258	43.3%	115	19.3%	374	62.7%
Are more suitable for jobs like massage and telephone operation	227	38.1%	118	19.7%	345	57.8%
Have eyes with weird appearances	178	29.8%	155	26.1%	333	55.9%
Are more prone to danger than sighted people when outside at night.	203	34.1%	126	21.2%	330	55.3%
Are poor and needy of the help and mercy of sighted people.	180	30.2%	73	12.3%	253	42.4%

[Relationship between educational level and misconception towards the visually impaired]

Education level affects a person's knowledge and impression of the visually impaired. The research has found that, interviewee groups with lower education levels hold more misconceptions towards visually impaired persons. The average score of groups with education levels "primary school or below" and "secondary school" are 3.18 and 3.42 respectively (both less than 3.53, the overall average score of all interviewees). Groups with "non-degree tertiary", "bachelor's degree", "master's degree or above" have the scores of 3.54, 3.77 and 3.94 respectively (all higher than the 3.53 overall average score). (See Table 3)

[Table 3]: relationship between educational level and misconception towards the visually impaired

	Primary school or below	Secondary school	Non-degree tertiary	Bachelor degree	Master's degree or above	Overall
Average score	3.18	3.42	3.54	3.77	3.94	3.53

[Relationship between age and misconception towards the visually impaired]

Age affects a person's knowledge and impression of the visually impaired. The research has found that, interviewees in the younger age groups have fewer misconceptions towards the visually impaired. Older groups have more misconceptions. Groups of ages 12-19(3.71), 20-29(3.79), 30-39(3.54) and 40-49 (3.54) have average scores higher than the overall average score. The score group of 50-59 is almost the same as the overall average score. Age groups 60-69 (3.31) and 70 or above (3.10) have average scores lower than the overall average score 3.53. (See Table 4)

[Table 4]: Relationship between age and misconception towards the visually impaired

	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70 or above	Overall
Average score	3.71	3.79	3.54	3.54	3.53	3.31	3.10	3.53

[Relationship between previous contact with the visually impaired and misconception towards the visually impaired]

The research has found that interviewees who had no previous contact with visually impaired persons agree with descriptions of misconceptions more than interviewees who have had previous contacts. Interviewees who had no previous contact (3.50) have a score that is lower than the overall average 3.53. Interviewees who had contact before (3.60) score higher than the overall average score of 3.53. (See Table 5)

[Table 5]: Relationship between previous contact with the visually impaired and misconception towards the visually impaired

	Previous contact with visually impaired persons	No previous contact with visually impaired persons	Overall
Average score	3.60	3.50	3.53

[Level of contact with visually impaired persons]

In describing the level of contact with visually impaired persons, most interviewees are willing to have a various levels of contact with them: “access information about the visually impaired” (80.2%); “meet visually impaired persons” (82.0%); “become friends with visually impaired persons”(84.8%); “work with visually impaired persons” (80.1%). But it appears that most interviewees cannot accept intimate relationships with visually impaired persons. For the descriptions “be in a relationship with a visually impaired person” and “marry a visually impaired person”, more than half (respective 54.2% and 52.8%) choose “not sure”. More than 20% (21.7% and 20.8% respectively) choose “strongly disagree” and “disagree” with the two descriptions. This reflects that although the general public are willing to get to know and make friends with visually impaired persons, most people still hold a very reserved view towards having an intimate relationship with them. (See Table 6)

[Table 6]: Level of contact with visually impaired persons

Description	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree& Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Overall
Access information about the visually impaired	67 (11.2%)	412 (69.0%)	479 (80.2%)	87 (14.6%)	31 (5.2%)	0 (0%)	2.1
Meet visually impaired persons	67 (11.2%)	422 (70.8%)	489 (82.0%)	77 (12.9%)	30 (5.1%)	0 (0%)	2.1
Become friends with visually impaired persons	70 (11.7%)	436 (73.1%)	506 (84.8%)	63 (10.6%)	24 (4.0%)	4 (0.6%)	2.1
Work with visually impaired persons	55 (9.3%)	422 (70.8%)	477 (80.1%)	80 (13.4%)	39 (6.5%)	0 (0%)	2.2
Be in a relationship with a visually impaired person	17 (2.9%)	131 (22.0%)	148 (24.9%)	323 (54.2%)	111 (18.5%)	14 (2.3%)	3.0
Marry a visually impaired person	17 (2.9%)	135 (22.6%)	152 (25.5%)	314 (52.8%)	116 (19.4%)	14 (2.3%)	3.0

[Relationship between gender and level of contact with the visually impaired]

The research has found that gender does not affect a person's willingness to make contact with visually impaired persons. The results show that male or female interviewees are all willing to have different levels of contact with the visually impaired. The average score is close to the overall average score. It seems that male interviewees are more willing to accept the possibility of having an intimate relationship with the visually impaired. Male interviewees score an average mark of 2.9 in "be in a relationship with a visually impaired person" and "marry a visually impaired person", a little lower than the female interviewees (3.0). But the difference is not apparent.

[Table 7]: Relationship between gender and level of contact with the visually impaired

Description	Male average score	Female average score	Overall
Access information about the visually impaired	2.1	2.1	2.1
Meet visually impaired persons	2.2	2.2	2.1
Become friends with visually impaired persons	2.2	2.2	2.2
Work with visually impaired persons	2.1	2.1	2.1
Be in a relationship with a visually impaired person	2.9	3.0	3.0
Marry a visually impaired person	2.9	3.0	3.0

[Relationship between age and level of contact with the visually impaired]

The research has found that, interviewees of a younger age are more willing to make different levels of contact with the visually impaired persons than older interviewees. Interviewees groups of ages 12-19 and 20-29 have average scores lower than or closer to the average score. On the other hand, groups of 30-39, 40-49 and 50-59 have a higher average score than the overall average score. Interestingly, it seems that older interviewees are more willing to enter intimate relationships with visually impaired persons. Group aged above 50-59 scored 2.6 in “be in a relationship with a visually impaired person” and “marry a visually impaired person”, much lower than the overall average score of 3.0 (See Table 8)

[Table 8]: Relationship between age and level of contact with the visually impaired

Description	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70 or above	Overall
Access information about the visually impaired	1.7	2.1	2.2	2.1	2.4	2.1	2.6	2.1
Meet visually impaired persons	1.7	2.0	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.1	2.4	2.1
Become friends with visually impaired persons	1.9	2.1	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.4	2.2
Work with visually impaired persons	1.7	2.0	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.1	2.4	2.1
Be in a relationship with a visually impaired person	3.0	3.0	3.1	3.1	3.1	2.6	2.6	3.0
Marry a visually impaired person	3.0	3.0	3.1	3.1	3.1	2.6	2.6	3.0

[Relationship between education level and level of contact with the visually impaired]

The research has found that interviewees with higher levels of education are more willing to make different levels of contact with the visually impaired than interviewees with lower levels of education. Interviewees with bachelor's degrees and master's degrees or above have average scores lower than or close to the overall average score. On the other hand, interviewees with educational levels "primary school or below", "secondary school" and "non-degree tertiary" have average scores higher than the overall average. Interestingly, interviewees in the "primary school and below" group are more willing to enter intimate relationships with visually impaired persons. The group shows an average score of 2.7 for descriptions "be in a relationship with a visually impaired person" and "marry a visually impaired person", far lower than the overall average score of 3.0 (See Table 9)

[Table 9]: Relationship between education level and level of contact with the visually impaired

Description	Primary school or below	Secondary school	Non-degree tertiary	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree or above	Overall
Access information about the visually impaired	2.3	2.2	2.2	2.0	1.9	2.1
Meet visually impaired persons	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.0	1.9	2.1
Become friends with visually impaired persons	2.4	2.2	2.2	2.0	1.9	2.2
Work with visually impaired persons	2.2	2.1	2.2	1.9	1.8	2.1
Be in a relationship with a visually impaired person	2.7	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Marry a visually impaired person	2.7	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0

[Relationship between previous contact with the visually impaired and level of contact]

The research has found that interviewees with previous contacts with visually impaired persons are more willing to make different levels of contact with them than interviewees without previous contact with the visually impaired. They have a lower average score than the overall average score. (See Table 10)

[Table 10]: Relationship between previous contact with the visually impaired and level of contact

Description	Previous contact with visually impaired persons	No previous contact with visually impaired persons	Overall
Access information about the visually impaired	2.0	2.2	2.1
Meet visually impaired persons	2.0	2.2	2.1
Become friends with visually impaired persons	2.1	2.2	2.2
Work with visually impaired persons	2.0	2.2	2.1
Be in a relationship with a visually impaired person	2.8	3.1	3.0
Marry a visually impaired person	2.8	3.1	3.0

8. Research analysis

[10 common misconceptions towards the visually impaired by general public]

I. They have more sensitive hearing compared with sighted persons

The research has found that more than 80% of interviewees agree or are unsure about whether visually impaired persons have more sensitive hearing than sighted persons. We understand that the general public have a subjective view that visually impaired persons, after losing parts of their visual abilities, must rely on hearing and therefore have more sensitive hearing. In fact, no medical study has proved that visually impaired persons have more sensitive hearing than sighted persons. The misconception is formed because visually impaired persons, after losing their sight, need to rely on other senses such as hearing, smell and touch to help them perceive and know the world. Since hearing is used more than other senses, it appears that visually impaired persons have more sensitive hearing than sighted persons in environment that allows relatively more focused attention. However, visually impaired person are also disturbed, just like any sighted person, in unfamiliar and noisy environments. They do not have special abilities to “orientate themselves by listening” as noted in story books. Also, it is not uncommon for the elderly to develop both vision loss and hearing loss. These visually impaired persons have a certain level of hearing impairment. Therefore it is a misconception to say that visually impaired persons have more sensitive hearing compared with sighted persons.

II. They are more musical than sighted persons

No research has shown that visually impaired persons are more musical than sighted persons. The visually impaired, just like the sighted, will be passionately musical individuals or not. The view of the general public might be influenced by many visually impaired singers and buskers on the streets in the past. In fact, the Cantonese “naamyam” - a singing tradition created by visually impaired persons are extremely well known. However, it cannot be concluded that all visually impaired persons are more musical than sighted persons.

III. They use specially-manufactured computers and mobile phones

More than 80% interviewees believe or are not sure that the visually impaired use specially-manufactured computers and mobile phones. Actually, there are no computers or mobile phones in Hong Kong specially-manufactured for the visually impaired. The computers and phones they use are more or less the same for most people, found in most retail stores. When using the computer, visually impaired persons install assistive softwares and hardwares, for example magnification softwares, screen-readers and Braille display units. These software and hardwares help users touch and listen to information, and the visually impaired use the regular keyboard to operate the computer. When using mobile phones, they simply install screen-readers on the phone to listen to information on the phone. Moreover, visually impaired persons are fully accessible to touch-screen smart

phones. Smart phones in the market have assistive functions installed when manufactured. It is a simple step to open the sound navigation to use mobile phones.

IV. They must be enrolled in special schools for the visually impaired

Now, there is only one special school for the visually impaired in Hong Kong - Ebenezer School & Home for the Visually Impaired. Visually impaired persons do not necessarily study at Ebenezer. Children are free to apply for mainstream schools or other special schools. Also, Ebenezer only offers programs from kindergarten to junior secondary school. Students have to leave Ebenezer to enter mainstream schools to receive integrated learning if they wish to continue their secondary school studies. Visually impaired students have the same educational rights as all other students. In the school year of 2012/13, 173 visually impaired students were studying in mainstream primary, secondary and tertiary institutions.¹⁰

V. They usually wear sunglasses

Blind characters in dramas usually wear sunglasses. This image has imposed a deep impression in most people's minds, which makes a lot of people conclude that visually impaired people in real life wear sunglasses. Actually, the visually impaired do not have a definite image. They, like all people, have individual appearances, characters and preferences. Sunglasses are personal preferences. Some visually impaired persons choose to wear sunglasses because of their eye defects which are likely stimulated by sunlight.

VI. They must use canes in order to walk

Visually impaired people do not necessarily use canes. They would not be unable to walk without canes. Canes are tools to help visually impaired persons to explore the road, to perceive the environment they are in, to test if there are blockages or unevenly-paved roads in order to prevent accidents. Therefore, the cane is used to help "orientation" and "action". Even without a cane, a visually impaired person can move about freely, although it might be more dangerous without the help of the cane. Visually impaired persons usually do not use canes in familiar environments like home or offices. Moreover, visual impairment can be divided into two types - partial sightedness and blindness. People with partial vision may not need to use canes to help. Therefore, it is incorrect to say that visually impaired persons must use canes in order to walk.

¹⁰ Please refer to document submitted by EDB to Legislative Council Panel on Education - Subcommittee on Integrated Education on 8 July 2013 (LC Paper No. CB(4)857/12-13(01): http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr12-13/english/panels/ed/ed_ie/papers/ed_ie0708cb4-857-1-e.pdf)

VII. Visually impaired persons are more suitable for jobs like doing massage and telephone operation

Before Hong Kong's economy rapidly developed, visually impaired persons, like other disabled persons lacked equal opportunities for education and employment. Due to limited social connection, visually impaired persons with lower educational level were usually only able to work as massagers, telephone operators or fortune tellers. These were the major career choices for visually impaired people in the past. Economic development and the introduction of integrated education have enabled visually impaired persons to receive higher and higher levels of education. Technological advancement also produced more and more assistive equipments to empower the visually impaired in knowledge and skills. They are able, with sufficient assistance, to work in different positions such as teaching, social work, translation, information technology and clerical work, etc. Although there are still many visually impaired persons working as massagers and telephone operators, it does not mean that these are the only jobs that they are capable of working.

VIII. They have eyes with weird appearances

The general public thinks that visually impaired people have eyes with strange appearances. This view might be formed by impressions from dramas or traditional concepts. It is true that some visually impaired persons have an apparent defected outlooks due to damages in the cornea. But more common eye defects affect the retina or the optic nerve. Retinopathy is an example of eye defect that does not affect the appearance of the eye. Patients' eyes have no difference from sighted people and it might be hard for others to be aware of their situation if not highlighted. Therefore, it is an incorrect concept to think that all visually impaired people have eyes with weird appearances.

IX. They are more prone to danger than sighted people when outside at night

Traditionally, disabled people are viewed as weaker people. It is a common belief that at night, disabled people, especially visually impaired people are easily exposed to peril than sighted people. This belief is incorrect. For completely blind people, the day and the night do not have a big difference. They use canes to help locate themselves and move around. It might be true to say that going outside at night is more dangerous for some partially-sighted people. Some partially-sighted friends have fine vision during the day but their vision turns worse in darker environments. If they do not use canes to walk around at night, it might in fact be more risky.

X. They are poor and needy of the help and mercy of sighted people

Out of sympathy, it is normal for people to believe that losing one's vision is a tragedy. In the past, many visually impaired people were deprived of education and employment opportunities and relied on their families for a living. Some of them even had to become beggars or fortune tellers for money. The situation in the past has created the impression that visually impaired people are poor and needy of help and mercy. These impressions are reinforced by media portrayal. In fact, equal education and employment opportunities came along with economic development. With the help of assistive equipments, visually impaired people can lead a life of dignity even with the loss of vision. They have the same rights as the general public. Therefore, it is an incorrect and outdated concept to view them as poor and weak and reliant on the mercy of sighted people.

9. Overall suggestions

Misconceptions stems from the lack of knowledge. Therefore, we suggest that the government should educate the public through different channels. A positive message about the visually impaired should be disseminated to eliminate stereotypes and misunderstandings, and therefore create more equal opportunities in education and employment for the visually impaired.

The research has found that interviewees without previous contact with the visually impaired hold more misconception than those who have had previous contact. This reflects that personal contact with visually impaired persons is effective in eliminating misconceptions. Hewstone's research has discovered that, making contact with the disabled in certain situations reduces bias. He concludes five major beneficial situations for the disabled and the non-disabled to come together, including: (1) in an equal position; (2) in a situation without stereotyping; (3) in a situation that requires the community to cooperate; (4) in which participants can gain mutual understanding; and (5) in the context of a larger society that supports equality.¹¹ For more concrete ways, HKBU suggests that the government and organizations serving the visually impaired should initiate public education activities. Through listening to visually impaired persons who share their personal experiences, the public can have a better knowledge and personal contact with the visually impaired.

Integrated education is also a very useful way for the sighted to get in touch with the visually impaired. It is suggested that mainstream schools admit more visually impaired students. This allows normal students to understand the abilities of visually impaired students through learning together.

Also, employers are encouraged to create more employment opportunities for visually impaired persons. This helps eliminate misconceptions of the public. This research has proven that the general public usually have the incorrect concept of visually impaired people having no working ability, and can only work as massagers or telephone operators. Therefore, it is necessary for the government to more actively enhance the employment opportunities for visually impaired persons. The government should raise employment opportunities for them to let them actualize their potentials. This lets the public learn more about the abilities of visually impaired persons in their working environment.

Many misconceptions by the public are shaped by the media and dramas. To eliminate these labels and misconceptions, HKBU urges that the media should take responsibilities and professional attitudes when reporting news related to the visually impaired. Producers should seek advice from visually impaired organizations when featuring them in programs. A more accurate and realistic image of the visually impaired should be portrayed.

¹¹ Hewstone, M. (2003). Inter-group Contact: Panacea for Prejudice? *The Psychologist*, 12(7): 352-355.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) states clearly the rights that disabled persons should enjoy. HKBU suggests the government should actively promote the content of the CRPD to the public. Furthermore, the coverage of the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) in different areas should be promoted in order that the public realize the essence of the DDO in eliminating discrimination against persons with disabilities.