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“THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET – Reflections in Brief”

Help special needs students succeed in Hong Kong universities

Alfred C.M. Chan is encouraged by the increase in funding for this minority group, and calls for a more holistic approach to help them meet their still considerable challenges

Does the name Lung Wai-hin ring a bell? She was the girl who appeared in a memorable TV commercial from more than a decade ago that uplifted the spirits of people in Hong Kong in the midst of the severe acute respiratory syndrome epidemic. Her cheerful face and “happy dance” are still at the back of many minds today.

Lung is also remembered for her inspiring story. She lost her sight as a baby due to a tumour in her retina but never grew despondent. She studied at Hong Kong’s Ebenezer School and Home for the Visually Impaired before her family moved to the US when she was 10. There, she graduated from high school with a full GPA score and went on to study at the University of California, Berkeley where she majored in English, played goalball, a sport for people with visual impairment, and was active in the Disabled Students Union.

I wonder what would have happened to her had her parents not moved to the US. Would she have been able to get into university, or would she have ended up like some of her peers in Hong Kong, who at best could only finish secondary education and secure positions like telephone operators?

Despite the availability of more opportunities in higher education, the number of tertiary students with special educational needs remains low. In fact, a 2012 report on China, including Hong Kong, by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities said that it was “troubled” by the low number of students with disabilities in tertiary education, which it said was “due to the lack of a coherent education policy”. It urged Hong Kong to “provide sufficient resources to ensure the accessibility in tertiary education”.

Though still low, the number of students with special needs has increased. In 2011, 532 were enrolled in full-time locally-accredited undergraduate

degree and sub-degree programmes; the figure went up to 1,061 in 2015. Education Bureau data also shows that, between 2008 and 2015, the number of special needs students in public primary and secondary schools more than doubled, from 17,560 to 39,470.

The increase could be attributed to the early identification of special needs children and early intervention measures, after years of advocacy by the Equal Opportunities Commission and NGOs.

In recent years, the government has recognised the need to take a long, hard look at its policies in special education needs. Last year, it injected HK\$1.3 billion into programmes to support special needs students in primary and secondary schools. However, support for tertiary students remains little – a one-off grant of HK\$20 million was given to the eight universities funded by the University Grants Committee, to be used in two years.

To date, some universities have no dedicated unit to coordinate support for these students, instead relying on their counselling service units to do so. One university had to turn down a student with hearing impairment because it was unable to arrange sign language interpretation service. In another case, a visually impaired student had to carry heavy assistive devices to class every day as his tertiary institution did not provide any for him.

For some years, the Equal Opportunities Commission has been rallying support for special needs students. In 2012, under its facilitation, the Network for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities in Local Tertiary Education Institutes was set up to encourage the sharing of best practices in promoting equal opportunities for minority groups, including special needs students. This month, the Commission organised a seminar at The University of Hong Kong to discuss ways to further support them.

As the number of SEN students getting tertiary education continues to rise, more funding is needed, not just to improve hardware, such as facility modifications and the acquisition of assistive devices, but also more importantly, for staff training and awareness campaigns to create a genuinely inclusive learning environment.

With better early assessment and intervention measures, children with special needs have a chance to improve their learning experience. Further, these students who are or will soon be enrolled in tertiary programmes

without the benefit of enhanced support during their younger years also deserve help to make the best of their higher education.

The challenges facing these students and other people with disabilities in Hong Kong are still considerable. What the Government should do is not to simply throw in money and hope for magic to happen, but to think for the long haul and reform its special education and even overall education policies holistically.

It will also have to match its effort in education with the creation of more job opportunities for people with disabilities.

There is no short cut to achieving an inclusive society and it is best to start the work now rather than later. We hope to hear more inspiring stories like Lung Wai-hin's in Hong Kong in the near future – a lot more.

Professor Alfred C.M. Chan
Chairperson, Equal Opportunities Commission

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