

Disabled Students Services (DSS) in Higher Education in Thailand

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It has been widely recognized that education can improve the quality of lives of the people. Education is the key factor in achieving employment. Changes in the labor market have rendered a postsecondary education critical to career achievement. Thus, almost all students, including students with disabilities, will look toward higher education for better opportunities in the labor market. Although Thailand has promulgated the Rehabilitation Act, the country's first specific legislation concerning persons with disabilities, since 1991 the opportunity for persons with disabilities to get quality education has still been limited. Special schools still face under qualified personnel and can accept only a small number of children with disabilities. Thus only a small proportion of students with disabilities can successfully manage a career path to postsecondary educational institutions. However, this is the challenge for higher education institutions, to provide appropriate support to ensure equal opportunity for students with disabilities.

Background of Education for Students with Disabilities

Attitudes of the Thai people regarding persons with disabilities have been rooted in a vague interpretation of Buddhism. Many people believe that the disability is the consequence of sin from past lives. Therefore persons with disabilities have often been treated as "ill-fated persons" who live to pay for their previous sins. Although this concept has gradually been changing, some form of this belief still prevails through these days. For example, it is widely felt that disabled persons are unable to help themselves; disabled persons need special treatment; disability is a barrier for all daily activities, involvement in religion, education, politics, etc. These attitudes have led to many policy formulations and measures. The establishment of foster homes, special vocational centers, and special schools for children with disabilities are the result of these attitudes.¹

Regarding their education, persons with disabilities had been exempted from school prior to 1978, when children with disabilities were included for the first time in compulsory education. The first school for the blind was established in Bangkok in 1939 with the help and support from Ms. Caulfield, a blind American women who had devoted herself to helping blind children in Thailand. The opening of a school for the blind had aroused public concern and the first special education program for the deaf was started at Somarnus Temple School in 1951 which led to the opening of Sethasathien school for the Deaf in 1953. This movement was the beginning of the new paradigm, that persons with disabilities are capable of learning. Since then, many special schools have been opened for all types of students with disabilities, such as schools for students with intellectual disabilities which was opened in 1964, and Srisanwan schools for students with physical disabilities in 1965. Most of these special schools are boarding schools and located in the metropolitan areas of Thailand. The educational opportunities for disabled children were still severely limited because many parents could not afford access to these schools due to their economic limitations, and some felt uncomfortable sending their children to school

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away from home². Most of these parents would rather raised their disabled child by themselves than leave him or her in the hands of some strangers. Nevertheless, with the effort from many government organizations and the public, most parents have begun to accept this approach and seen this as a better opportunity for their disabled child. Finally, some have begun to send their children to these schools. At present, there are 43 special schools throughout Thailand that are provided by the Bureau of Special Education, Ministry of Education.

Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions

Before government reform in 2003, the education of children with disabilities was under the main responsibility of the Special Education Division in the Department of Public Education, Ministry of Education. After 2003, this division was changed into “the Bureau of Special Education”. Significant progress was made in 1999 when the government passed the National Education Act, 1999. Though the purpose of this legislation covered all children, greater attention was focused on children with special education needs and the government proclaimed 1999 the “Year of Education for Persons with Disabilities”. The disabled students were finally entitled to receive education at all levels. The slogan “every child who wants to learn must have the chance to learn in any schools” was publicly announced, and the Ministry of Education put a lot of effort and additional budget for providing facilities, media, services and other forms of educational aid into special education. This law opened the door wide for children with disabilities to receive education and related services from various types of schools: 43 special schools, 76 special centers, and 18,618 inclusive schools. The statistics for students with disabilities has reflected the increasing number of students with disabilities, increasing from 144,684 in the year 2000 to 187,050 in 2004.³ These figure prompted the need for postsecondary education institutions to prepare the support services for students with disabilities in the near future.

In the past, only a small number of students with disabilities were able to enter into post secondary education institutions. The first public data of students with disability in higher education institutes in Thailand may be about two blind students who passed the entrance examination to study at Chulalongkorn University and Bansomdejchaopraya College for Teacher Education respectively in 1960.⁴ At that time, no post secondary education institutions had any support system, nor did they have any knowledge about how to work with students with disabilities. Many university professors had never previously thought that blind people were capable of learning in the same class with other students at the university level, and they were reluctant to accept these blind students into their universities. However, with the strong determination and help from some university faculty and their student peers, both of these students successfully graduated. This accomplishment made Thai society realize that the blind student was no different in intellectual ability, or other abilities required for post-secondary education, from sighted students.

However, attitudinal barriers still existed and some students with disabilities continued to encounter rejection by some universities. There was evidence that blind students were denied the opportunity to study in some universities because some university professors thought that university education would be of no use for them, since there would be no appropriate jobs after their graduation. The kind of jobs that blind persons could typically

do would not require education at the university level, such as work as a telephone operator, Thai masseuse, or lottery ticket seller. However, the leaders of the disability movement did not surrender to this decision. They went to talk to the universities and the public and those students with disabilities were accepted into the universities. Since then more students with disabilities have successfully entered into various universities, and the number of students with disabilities between 1970 and 2000 has risen to about 1,000 students.

The Emergence of the Disabled Students Services (DSS) System in Higher Education

With the passage of the National Education Act of 1999, which opened the door for educational opportunity for children with disabilities, more students with disabilities have been heading for universities. Though many students with disabilities have successfully entered into the universities, they have had very little choice in choosing the subjects to study. Many of them had to study in the Arts, Social Sciences or in Special Education because these were the only available fields that were offered to them.

Most of the support services began at the universities that offered a special education program due to the large number of students with disabilities in such programs. The majority of these services were set up with the help from private funding especially organizations related to blind persons such as the Christian Foundation of the Blind and the Association of the Blind, to help their blind students. Most of the blind students in the universities had received support from the Foundation since they were in schools and the support was continued throughout their university time. The organizations of the blind not only provided support for individual blind students, they also helped to set up the support services within the universities. At the same time, the disability leaders and the parents of the children with disabilities group were constantly working on the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly the right to higher education. International Force on right and equal opportunity for persons with disabilities was also the enabling factor on this move. With the movement of the disability group together with some universities faculties, the Office of Higher Education Commission began to take action by organizing the first workshop on disability policy in higher education institutions in 2003. The participants were university professors, administrators, and disability leaders. This workshop was very fruitful and resulted in the agreement to establish the disability support system in some universities.

The Office of the Higher Education Commission had promulgated the National Policy on Education for Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions in 2004. The objective of this National Strategic Plan was to provide equal educational opportunity for students with disabilities in post secondary institutions by encouraging the universities to establish an educational support services system, or Disability Support Service (DSS), in their universities. This National Policy also had action plans and a budget to support the activities of the universities for providing access to disabled students.

The first Disability Support Service Units were first established at Mahidol University (Ratchasuda College) and Rajabhat Suan Dusit University, because these two universities had a large number of deaf and blind students. When the policy from the Office of the Higher Education Commission was announced and with requests from the disability group, other universities began to set up their own DSS units. Currently, there

are 11 higher education institutions that have DSS Centers. For the universities that have a Special Education Program such as all Rajabhat Universities and Mahidol University, the DSS units are run by the professors in the Special Education Program. For the universities that do not offer this program, such as Thammasart University, Ramkhamheang University and Sukothai Thammathirat University, the DSS centers are run by the staff of the Division of Student Affairs.

The Preparation of DSS Personnel

Although most of the personnel who work or provide services for students with disabilities have a background in special education, their understanding about the concepts and scope of disability support service has been limited. The concept of a right for the disabled students to request accommodation, adaptation and assistive technology was new to Thai society. Thus there was a need for personnel development in this field. The training program, which was a partnership between the University of Northern Colorado and the Office of Higher Education Commission, was the very first program to train staff members who are currently working in the DSS centers. Twenty two staff members from 11 DSS centers, and two from the Office of Higher Education Commission, were selected into this program with the commitment to improve and expand the services in their universities and supervise other universities in establishing DSS units in their universities in the future.

The Data on Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Institutions

The first official survey of students with disabilities in higher education institutes was conducted by the Office of the Higher Education Commission in 2003. Since then, the survey of students with disabilities has been conducted annually. The results of the survey revealed that the number of students with disabilities in post secondary institutions has increased gradually from 1,024 in 2005⁵ to 1,156 in 74 institutions in 2007 and 1,308 in 76 institutions in 2008⁶. The majority of students with disabilities are students with physical disabilities, followed by students with visual disability, and students with communication disability, respectively. Students with psychological/behavioral disability account for less than 4 % of all students with disabilities.

Most of the students with disabilities were in public four year universities, followed by Rajabhat Universities. Although students with disabilities have access to all the universities, the opportunity to choose the subjects or the faculties to study are still limited. The results from the survey have shown that almost all of the students with disabilities study in the fields of social science and the humanities.⁷

Although Thailand has had the National Education Act of 1999 along with the regulations and measures concerning educational and related services for children and youth with disabilities, the enforcement has been mainly focused on schools offering basic educational services. Post secondary educational institutions have not become fully aware of this law. Only some higher educational institutions have concern about the issue of disability. The results from the 2007 survey revealed that only 115 out of 187 higher education institutes (61.5 %) responded to the questionnaire. Among these 115 institutes, only 74 institutions (64.3%) had students with disabilities, and only 33.1 % had

established policy on equal opportunity for students with disabilities to access into their universities. Only 7 institutes had a policy promoting students with disabilities or a quota system, while the rest of these institutes had no special policy on students with disabilities. These figures have remained relatively unchanged from 2004 until 2007.

For educational support services, only a few universities have established formal Disability Support Service (DSS) office. The results from the 2007 survey showed that 11 higher education institutions (9.8%) reported that they had either set up the DSS office or had assigned the responsibility to the Faculty of Special Education. About the same number of the higher educational institutions assigned this duty to be part of the General Educational Services Section or Counseling Section or the Division of Student Affairs.

The results from the latest survey in 2008, show a slight increase in the number of DSS centers in universities. From 11 institutions in 2007, there were now 15 institutions that had DSS centers. Twenty-one institutions had assigned the responsibility to the Division of Students Affairs, while 12 universities reported that each faculty that had students with disabilities took care of their own students.

It was noteworthy to find that students with learning disability were found to comprise only 0.35% of all students with disabilities. This figure was considered to be a small proportion compared to the statistics of students with learning disabilities in the United States. In the U.S. this group was found to be the majority among students with disabilities. The students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions in the U.S. were estimated to represent nearly 10 percent of all college students.⁸ In 1998, two in five freshmen with disabilities reported having a learning disability.⁹

Employment of Persons with Disabilities

Regarding of the employment, there is no official survey on the employment rate of these graduates with disabilities. However, studies on the employment of persons with disabilities had indicated that persons with disabilities had much lower rate of employment than persons without disabilities. The result from the 2007 Disability survey shown that among population aged 15 years and over, 74 % of general population were employed compared to only 35% in persons with disabilities. Among persons with disabilities who were employed, half of them (46.6%) were self-employed. About 25 % were contributing family workers. Women were more likely to work as contributing family workers than men.¹⁰

In conclusion, the results of the annual survey of students with disabilities in Thailand indicate that 70% of the higher educational institutions have no special office designated to working for students with disabilities. Only one-third of the universities had policy on equal opportunity for students with disabilities to access into their universities Thus, students with disabilities still have to rely on receiving support from their peers and the faculty staffs. Attitudinal barriers still exist in many universities. Although Thailand had just recently passed the Persons with Disabilities Empowerment, Act 2007, and the Persons with Disabilities Education Act in 2008, these laws have not been turned into effective actions yet. At present there is no official study on employment of graduates with disabilities though the unofficial data have shown that many of the graduates with disabilities were underemployed. Thus, there is the need for the follow up system and accurate data on students with disabilities and their work after they finish the universities

in order to assess the effectiveness of the disabled students services. Finally, there's also the need for DSS personnel development program and disability awareness program for university administrators and faculties to ensure that the students with disabilities will have equal educational opportunity and the appropriate supports they need during their university time.

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