

Executive Summary

Under the Education Bureau's Integrated Education Policy, the term "special educational needs" (SEN) refers to students who have learning problems or disabilities, including specific learning difficulties, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, physical disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech and language impairments, and mental illness. Under the Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan, the categories of disability also include all of the types of SEN mentioned above.

Students with SEN may also be known as disabled people once they have left school and entered the workplace. Unfortunately, they face difficulties in employment because of their handicaps, regardless of their higher-education qualifications. According to the Census and Statistics Department, 43,900 disabled people had tertiary-education qualifications in 2013, but only 35% were employed – just half of the 70% employment rate of the overall population with such qualifications. Care-ER, an NGO assisting people with disabilities in employment, also found that only 59% of their respondents had employment, among 206 higher-educated youths with disabilities. Furthermore, some of them were only employed in a position with lower educational requirements.

With the government actively implementing integrated education, the number of SEN students in Hong Kong who are studying in mainstream schools has been rising in recent years, as have more opportunities for them to pursue further study. According to the Education Bureau, in 2017/18 there were 45,360 SEN students studying in mainstream primary and secondary schools, accounting for 8.2% of the total student population. The numbers of students studying in the local post-secondary programmes has also risen, by 50%, from 1,046 to 1,565 in 2017/18. It is expected that the employment needs of SEN students will be rising in the near future.

Education and tertiary qualifications have not been considered to be keys to the door of employment for youths with SEN. Such individuals are still facing different challenges in the workplace and are even being wasted as human resources when they are forced to work in unsuitable positions. Employment

could be an opportunity for them to release their potential and interact with society. Therefore, enhancing the career opportunities for higher-educated youths with SEN or disabilities is not only beneficial for them but also bolsters an integrated society.

The Labour Department has launched the “Work Orientation and Placement Scheme” to provide incentives that encourage employers to offer job vacancies to people with disabilities. However, overseas experiences, such as in Japan and Taiwan, have included more aggressive measures to encourage employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Those countries have established a mandatory employment quota system requiring enterprises to employ a certain number or percentage of disabled people.

This study investigated the difficulties encountered in the workplace by SEN youths with tertiary-education qualifications, and it looked at the public views of youths with SEN or disabilities. It is hoped that possible solutions will be highlighted that would help to enhance those individuals’ career opportunities, help them achieve financial independence and foster their integration into the community.

In conducting this research in October 2018, data were collected by conducting a survey of 520 Hong Kong residents, aged 18 and above, case interviews with 20 youths with SEN, and interviews with five experts and academicians.

Main Discussion

- 1. Youths with SEN or disabilities still face difficulties in employment, regardless of their higher-education qualifications. Because of the rising numbers of such young people, they should be provided with employment support in order to better utilize their potential.**

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Youths with SEN or disabilities are a minority in our society. Their achievements in their educational qualifications show that they also possess the ability to be employed. The government should formulate policies to enhance their employability in order to address the problems that they are facing.

- 2. Higher-educated youths with SEN or disabilities are an important human resource in our society. Providing employment support for them could improve their financial independence and integration into society, and in the long run would also relieve the burdens they place on our society.**

As indicated in the study's interviews with SEN youths, their biggest reason for working was just as it is with ordinary people, to build an independent life with their own hands in order to release their burden on our society and government. The survey also found that the respondents generally agreed that encouraging employment for SEN students would help those students integrate into society and enhance their financial independence.

Experts and academicians also believe that those young people are an important human resource in our society. To provide them with employment opportunities that would help them release their

potential and that would better utilize them as human resources in our society is a win-win situation. Students with SEN can achieve an independent life through working, and at the same time, they can help to fill job vacancies caused by manpower shortages.

3. Barriers faced by higher-educated youths with SEN or disabilities in the workplace are (a) a lack of employment support, (b) negative employer attitudes and (c) poor understanding on the part of the general public.

Integrating the findings of the on-site survey and interviews with SEN youths and experts, we find that the main workplace barriers faced by higher-educated youths with SEN or disabilities are explained by the following problems.

a. There is a lack of employment support for higher-educated young people with SEN or disabilities.

Currently, the Selective Placement Division of the Labour Department provides a free employment service to job seekers with disabilities, including for the visually impaired, hearing impaired, physically handicapped, chronically ill, individuals with autism spectrum disorder, people with an intellectual disability, the ex-mentally ill, and people with specific learning difficulties and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

The SEN youths in the study's case interviews indicated that the employment services provided by the Labour Department did not fit the needs of well-educated youths with disabilities and SEN. Most of the job vacancies were targeted for "blue-collar" workers and only required lower educational levels, so they had limited impact for the job seekers with better educational backgrounds. Experts also indicated that the government had focused only on the support for SEN students within the educational system and failed to support them later in their career prospects. In the current situation, they are still facing difficulties in employment, regardless of whether they have the benefits of higher education.

b. Employers behave conservatively in hiring people with disabilities.

Some of the interviewees in this research expressed that a major difficulty for them is employers being unwilling to hire them. Employers were reluctant to hire an employee with disabilities because they feared those employees would lower the firm's productivity. In this survey, the respondents also believed that the employers' unwillingness to hire workers with disabilities was the major reason that SEN students face difficulty in employment.

Some of the experts we interviewed believed that the labour market of Hong Kong places heavy demands on employees. Employers expected that all employees would be equipped with various abilities so that they could make the biggest profit for the company and maximize their own value. Therefore, with their personal limitations, people with disabilities were always put in a disadvantaged position when they had to compete with others. Even if they ultimately had employment, some of them only found simple jobs.

c. The general public lacks an understanding of people with SEN or disabilities.

In addition, experts believed that the difficulty in employment for people with SEN and disabilities was also related to the public's misunderstanding about such individuals. The general public believed, erroneously, that those individuals' abilities must be lower than the abilities of others. Employers hiring people with disabilities did not aim at utilizing the workers' full potential but instead hired them from a perspective of compassion.

The study also found that the general public lacked opportunities to have contact with people with SEN or disabilities, thus contributing to their misunderstanding. In this survey, near 60% of the respondents had never had contact with a person with SEN or disabilities, and less than 40% of them had ever had such contact. Furthermore, 26% of the survey respondents said they were

unwilling to work with a person with SEN or disabilities. The reasons they gave were that (i) they believed working with SEN youths would increase their own workload (60.7%), (ii) thus revealing an ignorance of working with such individuals (43.7%), and (iii) thinking those individuals could be “dangerous or harmful” (27.4%). The facts prove these beliefs to be wrong – the youths with SEN who participated in the interviews expressed that their work performance and abilities are not necessarily worse than those of others.

4. Establishment of a mandatory employment quota system for persons with disabilities is controversial in Hong Kong.

From the survey, the respondents believed that a mandatory employment quota system would be the most useful measure in encouraging employment for people with disabilities or SEN. On a scale of 0-10, with 10 meaning “strongly agree” and 0 denoting “strongly disagree”, the average response value was 7.69 when respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement that “a mandatory employment quota system for persons with disabilities could be helpful for their employment”. In the case interviews, some of the participants also believed that a mandatory employment quota system would be helpful in employing more people with disabilities. Under a quota system, enterprises would be required to employ a certain number or percentage of people with disabilities.

However, experts and some participants in the case interviews were concerned about the possibility of implementing a quota system in Hong Kong. They feared that the quota system would not only increase business costs, it could also create negative effects for the people with disabilities. In some overseas experiences with quota systems, employers expended minimal cost to hire people with disabilities, in order to simply fulfil the legal requirement. At the same time, employees with disabilities were not required to share any responsibilities. That situation had a negative psychological effect on the people with disabilities, because they were suspicious of their own ability and value.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed in this study:

1. Provide multiple internship opportunities

This research suggests expanding the government summer internship scheme for students with disabilities by doubling the number of placements to 200. The government should also reserve some placements for outstanding SEN students so that they can continue working for the government after their education. Institutions of higher education should provide more internship opportunities for students with SEN, so that they can better equip themselves before entering the workplace.

2. Improve the employment services

Taking the “Work Orientation and Placement Scheme” as an example, the subsidized payment period for employing disabled workers should be extended to one year, instead of the current nine months, although the maximum allowance for employers could still be maintained at HK\$51,000. The recruitment service run by the Selective Placement Division of the Labour Department should also provide more employment opportunities for disabled applicants who are technically well qualified, and not just offer low-skill job openings.

3. Recruit more people with disabilities into government departments

As the largest employer in Hong Kong, the government should recognize the importance of setting a good example and should display a more positive attitude toward employing disabled people. This research also recommends that the government take the lead role in employing disabled people, so that the overall percentage of civil servants with disabilities would rise from 1.8% to 4% and new-hire civil servants with disabilities would constitute no less than 2% of the total new-hire civil servants per annum.

4. Provide extra subsidies for continuing education

This study also suggests that the Community Care Fund set up assistance programmes for people with SEN or disabilities, offering an extra HK\$10,000 in subsidies for their continuing education. By choosing their own interests or professions for their further studies, the hope is that their competitiveness in the job market would be enhanced. More courses should be provided on such topics as communication skills and confidence enhancement, to help them to adapt in the workplace.

5. Strengthen life-planning support for SEN students

In order to enhance the employment opportunities for SEN students, life-planning instruction in their early stages of education could play a significant role in fostering the students' self-understanding, personal planning and articulation of progression pathways. At the stage when the SEN students are engaged in higher education, they should be provided with more career guidance, such as recruitment talks and workshops on interview skills and aptitude tests. With stronger life-planning education for SEN students, they will be equipped to make wise decisions in accordance with their interests, abilities and orientations.

6. Enhance the public's understanding of students with disabilities or SEN

The government should enhance the public's understanding of persons with disabilities or SEN. For instance, topics about SEN and disabilities should be taught in "Public Health" or "Personal Development and Interpersonal Relationships" curricula under the umbrella of Liberal Studies. It is hoped that all students could be equipped with the skills to communicate with a person with SEN or disabilities and understand that their abilities are not necessarily inferior to the abilities of others. The government should also promote those messages to the general public in order to relieve employers' concerns and prejudices about people with SEN or disabilities.