




[Go to CS Voice Index](#) 

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Views

The Road Ahead for Special School Leavers

With the introduction of New Senior School Academic Structure in the 2009/10 school year, under the principle of equal education, students with intellectual disability enrolled in non-regular courses in special schools can also enjoy the basic education of elementary school to junior high school extended until their completion of Secondary Six, like any other school students. All stakeholders expect special school students to enhance their social competitiveness during their three-year stay so that they may have opportunities to pursue further studies, receive vocational training or supported employment, enter sheltered workshops or day activity centres or be admitted to adult residential homes, after graduation. In the past eight years, however, the transition path for students in special schools remains challenging. The life planning that Education Bureau has been vigorously promoting in recent years has also lagged behind for students leaving special schools. What we cannot bear to see is when school leavers fail to find a way out, they are stuck in the schools, reluctant to leave the dormitory or idle at home to wait for up to eight years for adult service transition.

Further Education and Employment Difficulties

Students in special schools receiving the general curriculum education usually attend the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination. A handful of outstanding students can go to university and stay in university dormitories. This is especially important for physically handicapped and wheelchair-bound students, as they can save the hassle of travelling under inadequate transport facilities. However, those students whose results are not as outstanding would find it difficult to move on to diploma or associate degree programmes due to inadequate transport facilities, the lack of residential services or a poor inclusive atmosphere in the institutes. Even if disabled students complete their university, diploma or associate degree programmes, their employment opportunities tend to diminish due to employer's lack of understanding on the disabled's employability, the lack of barrier-free facilities in workplaces and inadequate transport facilities. In this year's Policy Address, the Government proposed to increase the quota for internship programmes for students with disabilities to 100, this does not equate to an employment quota. The chance of employment after the internship is still bleak. People with disabilities with tertiary education backgrounds often face the plight of graduation equating unemployment. Some educated persons with disabilities are unemployed for a long time and can only live on comprehensive social security assistance. They not only lose their morale and dignity, but also waste their years of hard earned learning.

Lack of Transitions to Adult Medical, Rehabilitation and Residential Services

At present, students from 61 special schools in Hong Kong, according to their types of disabilities, receive medical care, treatment services or stay in dormitory accommodation at special schools during their studies. However, due to the long waiting time for various disabled adult services, some of the students may need to stay home to wait if they fail to get successful transition to adult services after graduation. In general, at the local community level, they can only get about one hour a week home rehabilitation service, which is far less than the rehabilitation services they receive while they are in school, and that also increases their chances of getting sick. Due to the lack of access to adult services and the varied quality of private adult residential care institutions, it is difficult to estimate the social resources consumed due to prolonged waiting. What is even more daunting is that school leavers who have multiple medical needs and use ventilators are classified by the Social Welfare Department as beyond the range of services that nursing homes can provide, and are thus not eligible for waiting for adult services.

Lack of a Proactive Strategy on the Overall Special School Leavers Transition

The Vocational Training Council's two-year vocational training programme for disabled and intellectually disabled graduates is not linked to the job market. There are only a few students who can continue their employment upon completion of the course. Eventually, some disabled persons choose to return to sheltered workshops or stay idle. As mentioned in the Policy Address this year, some trades are seeking the introduction of foreign labour due to the lack of workforce. If the Government can focus its resources and train students in special schools who have the potential for employment according to the types of jobs required by all trades and industries, we believe some of them will certainly be able to become hardworking and loyal staff and contribute to Hong Kong under the same blue sky.

Lastly, we strongly hope Mrs. Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive who had been a Social Welfare Secretary, to work out a tripartite cross-government platform to integrate special school education, medical care and social welfare services for adults with disabilities to break the bureaus' "minding their own business" barrier. They should work together to formulate long-term school-leaving policies for disabled students so that they can give ones' best back to society and enhance their quality of life.



Pui Oi School student and one of the "Top Ten Regeneration Warriors" Wu Yui Kwan has multiple intensive nursing needs but has no suitable adult service available for her up till now.



Could the Chief Executive still remember the wish of wheelchair-bound Chan Guan kiu to become a social worker in the future?

[Back to Top](#)