

TOWARDS INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN VIETNAM'S HIGHER EDUCATION: CASE STUDY OF VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY, HANOI

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Abstract: With a number of 6.1 millions making up 7.8% of the national population, Vietnam is one of the countries that have the highest numbers of persons with disabilities (PWDs). However, at the level of higher education the proportion PWDs is extremely low with only 0.1% of PWDs having completed a bachelor program. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the current status of learning environment at university campuses in Vietnam, focusing on the Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNUH) as a case study. More specifically the paper first reviews the institution's policies towards PWDs. It then presents the difficulties and obstacles faced by students with disabilities (SDWs) by analysing data collected over both in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys with SDWs at VNUH. The research result shows that the issue of PWDs has been acknowledged and regulated in a number of policy documents at the institutional level. At the same time SDWs have generally been taken care of by the affiliated universities, faculty and staff members, youth unions, clubs and fellows. However, in terms of facilities and accessibility there is a big space for improvement which needs to receive a stronger attention and investment from the institution as well as the ministerial and governmental bodies.

Keywords: *Students with disabilities, Inclusive learning environment, Higher education in Vietnam, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past decades the number PWDs has increased worldwide, accounting for 15% of the world's population in 2011 [1]. In order to create a more developed and equal world the global community has made considerable movements towards the issue of inclusion for PWDs of which education is one of the most important impetuses bringing various benefits for children with disabilities (CWDs) [2]. However, research has pointed out that PWDs, especially CWDs, have to face with

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a lot of obstacles and difficulties in accessing and completing a certain level of education [3] [4]. This is especially true for higher education in developing countries like Vietnam where only 0.1% of the total PWDs obtain bachelor's degree and 6.5% have Certificate of Professional Practising, according to WHO's statistics¹. Together with other countries in the world, in the past years Vietnam has made strong commitments to support PWDs. Before signing and ratifying the CRCD in 2007 and 2014, Vietnam enacted the Ordinance on Disabled Persons in 1998 which then was replaced by the 2010 Law on PWDs. The Government also issued the National Action Plan to support PWDs for the period 2006-2010 and a dozen of directives, decrees and decisions that took remarkable protection to PWDs [5]. The aim of this paper is to investigate the inclusiveness of the hard and soft learning environment at the Vietnam National University, Hanoi, a leading university in Vietnam. It also presents the difficulties and obstacles faced by SWDs by analysing data collected over both in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys with SDWs at VNUH.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study design: With a mixed-methods design the study included a desk review, questionnaire survey, key informant interviews, focus groups, and observations.

Desk review: The desk review included the collection of documents and data from various sources including academic writings, reports, documents and data from international organizations, ministries and the Vietnam National University, Hanoi and its member institutions.

Survey: The study used a survey questionnaire which included questions related to legislation, learning resources, accommodations, transportation and supports for SWDs. The questionnaire was sent to the SWDs in four VNUH's member institutions that have the available contact information of SDWs via emails with a link to Google online survey by the researcher or with the help from the Department of Student Affairs of each affiliation. The sample size of the online survey was 39 SWDs of whom 35 respondents successfully answered and sent back the questionnaires. The study used MS Excel to descriptively analyze the survey data. The data were rated on nominal or ordinal scales. The quantitative results are presented as frequencies and percentages.

Focus Group Discussions: There were 27 SWDs from the USSH, ULIS and UET participating in the focus group discussions which were conducted in person by

1 <https://thanhvien.vn/giao-duc/ly-do-khien-sinh-vien-khuyet-tat-bo-hoc-690495.html> retrieved on December 3rd 2018.

the researcher and the research assistants on two different days. Each focus group discussion lasted about 120 to 150 minutes and were digitally audio recorded.

Observations: The research team visited all 13 members of VNUH to collect data of SWDs and related documents. During the site visits, the research team members also conducted observations and took photos of the universities’ facilities and accessibility. In addition, before, during and after the focus group discussions the research team observed the interaction between SWDs and students without disabilities, lecturers and staff members of the universities. By so doing the research team can obtain a better understanding of the accessibility and inclusion of the universities for SWDs.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The number of students with disabilities at VNUH

Since 2010 VNUH has had 57 SWDs including 29 females and 28 males based on information provided by The Department of Student Affairs of the member universities. The vast majority of these SWDs enrolled in the USSH (46%), the others studied at ULIS (20%), UET (21%), HUS (11%) and SMP (2%). By forms of disability, the largest group has mobility impairment (56%), followed by visual disabilities (40%) and speech impairment (4%). There are no students with hearing or learning disabilities.

There are currently 39 students studying at five member universities of VNUH of whom 18 students are at the USSH, 12 students at the ULIS, 6 students at UET, 2 students at HUS and 1 student at SMP. These students include those enrolling in member universities of VNU from the academic year of 2014 and some of them graduate in June of 2018. Among the 39 SWDs, 26 are females and 13 are males. (Table 1)

Table 1: Current SWDs by form of disabilities, school and major (2014 – 2018)

	Physical disabilities N = 19	Speech impairment N = 1	Visual impairment N = 19	Total N = 39
School of Medicine & Pharmacy (VNU-SMP)	3% (1)	-	-	3% (1)
• Pharmaceutical	3% (1)	-	-	3% (1)
University of Engineering & Technology (VNU-UET)	13% (5)	3% (1)	-	16% (6)
• IT	13% (5)	3% (1)	-	16% (6)

University of Social Sciences & Humanities (VNU – USSH)	15% (6)	-	30% (12)	45% (18)
• Social work	3% (1)		12% (5)	15% (6)
• History	3% (1)		6% (3)	9% (4)
• International			3% (1)	3% (1)
• Religion			3% (1)	3% (1)
• Psychology	11% (4)		4% (2)	15% (6)
University of Languages & International Studies (VNU – ULIS)	15% (6)	-	15% (6)	30% (12)
• English Language Teacher Education	6% (4)		8% (5)	14% (9)
• Chinese Language	2% (1)			2% (1)
• Korean Language			2% (1)	2% (1)
• No data	2% (1)			2% (1)
University of Science (VNU – HUS)	3% (1)	-	3% (1)	6% (2)
• International Physics			3% (1)	3% (1)
• Biology	3% (1)			3% (1)
Total	49%	3%	48%	100%

Source: Compiled by author based on data from member universities of VNUH

B. Vietnam National University, Hanoi's Initiatives concerning SWDs

It is shown that VNUH strictly obeys the Law on Disability and implemented its obligations towards SWDs as regulated by the Law. However, there is no specialized division being in charge of matters related to SWDs. The Department of Student Affairs is the unit who manages and solves all issues related to students in general and SWDs in particular.

It is also found that there is not any written guidance documents issued by VNUH to its affiliated universities on the implementation of the government's regulations on SWDs. This status leads to the fact that each VNU's member institution issues its own regulations. For example, the USSH promulgated document No. 2579/XHNV-CTSV date 10th October 2017 on guiding the tuition fee examination procedures for full time students and the ULIS issued document No. 186/TB-DHNN date 07th March 2018 on notification of implementation policies towards students for the second semester of school year 2017-2018. Other policy documents concerning SWDs could be found on the website of each member university. Although such

documents are separately issued, common regulations could be pointed out as follows: First, SWDs whose families are recognized as poor are exempted from paying tuition fees. Second, financial support equivalent to VND 100,000/student per month is granted to SWDs who encountered financial difficulties for actual learning duration provided that it does not exceed 9 months per one academic year.

C. General information of survey respondents

There were 35 out of 39 SWDs at VNU answered the online survey questionnaire. The number of female SWDs (24 students) doubles that of male SWDs (11 students). According to Table 2 physical disabilities is the most popular form of disability among SWDs (18/35) at VNU and the UET is the university to have the highest number of students disabled physically (7/18 students). Visual impairment stands at the second place with 16/35 students, focusing mostly at the USSH (10/16 students). Only one student from the USSH has speech impairment and there are no students with hearing impairment or learning disabilities.

Table 2: Respondents by form of disabilities and school

	Physical disabilities N = 18 (51%)	Speech impairment N = 1 (3%)	Visual impairment N = 16 (46%)	Total N = 35
VNU-SMP	3% (1)	-	-	N = 1
VNU-UET	20% (7)			N = 7
VNU – USSH	14% (5)	3% (1)	29% (10)	N = 16
VNU – ULIS	14% (5)	-	17% (6)	N = 11
Total	51%	3%	46%	100%

It is notable that SWDs have a tendency to choose the majors which are suitable with their situations. For example, there are 10 out of 12 SWDs at the UET have physical disabilities. All of these 12 students choose to study Information Technology. The reason for this can partly be explained by one student who said: “I chose to study IT because I can sit still to study and work without having to move too much physically.” (*A female student with physical disabilities from the UET*). Similarly, Social work, Psychology and History are the three most popular majors among SWDs at the USSH, 6, 5 and 5 students, respectively. It is also understandable that the USSH is the institution to have the highest number of SDWs among all VNUH member universities. A SWD affirmed: “I study Social work and expect that after graduation I can find a job that can help other disabled people like me.” (*A male student with seeing*

impairment from the USSH). This opinion was shared by some other students in the group discussions.

D. SWDs' awareness of the national and institutional policies and legislations concerning SWDs

33 out of 35 respondents have Certificate of Disability. The two SWDs who do not have the Certificate are studying at the USSH. Being asked about the reasons why they did not obtain the Certificate of Disability, the students provided different reasons, but they shared one point in common which is the concern on multiple and complicated procedure to get the Certificate:

“When I was a child, I was totally being free from the tuition fee and received financial support under the regulation of the Law. In 2015, when I enrolled in the university, my family was informed that the policy of tuition fee exemption and reduction has been revised. Besides the Certificate of Disability, it is required that I have a Certificate of poor or near poor household in order to be tuition fee exempted. Then, my family decided not to take the Certificate of Disability because my parents were afraid of complicated procedure”. (*A female student with mobility disability from the USSH*)

“When I was a child, I did not want to be considered as a disable child and I used to think I could do anything like a normal person. Therefore, I did not agree to take a test to have Certificate of Disability. At the moment, I found that without such Certificate, I've got some difficulties. I want to get this Certificate now but I do not have free time and am afraid of the lengthen procedure”. (*A male student with speaking impairment from the USSH*)

Having the Certificate of Disability helps SWDs to be exempted from some requirements of the universities such as they do not have to take the Physical education and military education. Therefore, there are a few students applying for and obtaining the Certificate only after enrolling in the universities.

According to the survey, more than 50% of the respondents said that they had never known or heard of the 2010 Law on Disability while most of respondents (80%) answered they knew the university's polices for SWDs. The ratio is balanced 50-50 between SWDs knowing the university's SWDs management unit and those who do not. (Table 3)

Table 3: Awareness of SWDs of law and institutional policies for SWDs

	Yes	No
Your school's policies for people with disability	80% (27)	20% (7)
Law on Persons with Disability	43% (15)	57% (20)
Your school's PWD student management unit	50% (17)	50% (17)

It is understandable that the proportion of SWDs who know well the universities' policies for SWDs is higher than that of those who know about the Law on PWDs. This can be explained by at least two reasons. Firstly, before applying for the universities all most all the SWDs had studied very carefully the institutions' policies in order to know the requirements, especial exemptions, conditions or any kind of benefits that SWDs may have to meet or enjoy. Secondly, during the course of studying at the universities, these policies directly affect SWDs' learning and living situations. Therefore most of the SWDs when being asked showed good knowledges of the universities' policies.

"When I was in the 12th grade I started searching for information of universities on the websites. I studied carefully the admission policies of the University of Foreign Languages and International Studies. I then contacted the University and applied. With my good study results and my severe seeing impairment situation, I got accepted directly to ULIS without having to sit for the entrance examination. I think among VNUH's member universities, only ULIS considers accepting students with severe disabilities. Other universities only accept directly students with extremely severe disabilities." (*A female student with seeing impairment from ULIS*)

"When I was in the first year I didn't have to pay tuition fee because I have Certificate of Disability. However from 2015 the policy has changed so that only SWDs whose families are poor don't have to pay this money. Therefore I have had to pay for tuition fee since then because my family is not considered as poor. But I don't want to bother my parents, so I have been working with various jobs to pay for the tuition fees and living expenses by myself". (*A male student with physically disabilities from USSH*)

E. Assessment of hard environment at university

Learning resources: The question concerning the learning equipment is applicable for only students with seeing impairment (there are no students with hearing or learning disabilities). Therefore the total number of respondents answering this question is 16 out of 35 SWDs. 100% of these respondents confirm that there is not any learning equipment

provided by or available at the university. These equipment include Braille books, large print keyboard, phone amplification, etc. Table 4 shows that 88% SWDs equipped the above learning resources by themselves, while 13% got such resources from sponsors. The other sources of supply are from sharing with friends and receiving from teachers, each account for 6%.

Table 4: Sources of learning resources

	Total N = 16
From teachers	6% (1)
Sponsored	13% (2)
My personal belongings	88% (14)
Share with my friends	6% (1)
From the residential college	-
From the library	-

All respondents said that they had never been to the libraries or just been there for one or two times because: (i) it does not have Braille books for visual impaired students and (ii) the space between book selves is not wide enough for wheelchairs. Respondents always ask teachers to send learning documents in soft copies at the beginning of the semester or download from the internet for their studying. In fact, 100% visual impaired students confirmed that they have difficulties in getting access to specific academic documents due to the lack of Braille hard copies, no free information on Internet and lectures are afraid of intellectual properties problems. Such difficulties significantly prevent them from researching and studying.

“Because there are no Braille books or learning materials available at the university, I have to rely on the soft files of PPT slides or reading materials provided by lecturers. However some lecturers don’t want to send us the soft copies of the lectures because of copy rights. In that case sometimes I have to ask for help from my friends who will read out the reading materials for me to hear and learn. I also download and install some apps in my smartphone that help to transfer from texts to audios. That is a very useful tool for me to study and to keep up with the daily life.” (A female student with seeing impairment from the ULLIS)

Classrooms and pathways for wheelchairs: With regards to the locations of classrooms and availability of pathways for wheelchairs, from our observations and according to the results of group discussions, it is found that only the USSH has built a pathway at the main building for wheelchairs and also arranged classrooms for

students with physical disabilities to learn on the first floor. “My university usually arranges the classrooms for the subjects that I study on the first floor so that I don’t have to climb up the stairs. If they forget to arrange an appropriate classroom I can submit a form to ask for rearrangement.” (*A female student with physical disability from USSH*)

In the other universities, there is no special policies to adjust the classrooms for physically impaired students leading them to have to study on high floors without ways for wheelchairs or elevators. In most cases, elevators are only available in the main office buildings of the universities. This is really a big challenge for SWDs. Most of them have to rely on the help from family relatives or friends who will carry their disabled fellows on their backs or accompany them on each step. “I do not have any close friends and I’m afraid to ask for their help. My classroom is on the third floor and my sister or my brother-in-law carries me to the classroom every day.” (*A male student with physical disability from UET*)

“Each time I want to go to a classroom upstairs, I have to go with my friend, or I have to ask for help from people around me.” (*A female student from UET*).

It can be seen that building more accessible facilities and infrastructure for SWDs is an important issue in order to improve the learning environment for SWDs while 89% of respondents considered elevators and flat pathways are of importance and extremely importance in the case of high-floor classrooms (Table 5). In addition, according to the survey results, for the question of what kind of reasonable accommodation that SWDs wish to have, 55% of respondents chose the accessibility of classroom’s location is the most wanted.

Table 5: Level of importance of ways for wheelchairs

	Pathways are leveled from the car parking for disable or from drop off point to all student’s facilities			If room/class located above ground floor lift or ramp should be provided with proper device. (audio/braille)		
	Male N = 11	Female N = 24	Total N = 35	Male N = 11	Female N = 24	Total N = 35
Not important	-	-	-	-	-	-
Moderately important		14% (5)	14% (5)	3% (1)	8% (3)	11% (4)
Important	20% (7)	26% (9)	46% (16)	9% (3)	20% (7)	29% (10)
Very important	11% (4)	29% (10)	40% (14)	20% (7)	40% (14)	60% (21)

Public washrooms: The team has observed that there is an area within a larger shared room in every floor. However, it is the most difficult area for SWDs to access because it is in very poor conditions. The area is not marked in Braille and there are even stairs somewhere. No grab bars on two sides in the rest rooms and no emergency alarm systems are found in washroom areas. There is no urinal on ground level or toilets for PWDs.

“I have never used the rest rooms at the university because they are too small and useless for me. I’d rather wait until coming home than use the rest rooms at the university.” (*A female student with physical disabilities from ULIS*).

F. Assessment of soft environment at the university

Although the physical facilities for SWDs of the universities are at poor level, a friendly and mentally inclusive environment has been created for SWDs in both school time and life time. Lecturers are usually supportive and give advices to SWDs when they have difficulties in learning. In addition, classmates are assigned by turn to support their disabled friends in guiding students with visual impairment to classes and carrying students with physical disabilities to classes or up/down stairs. Especially, the volunteer student clubs play an important role in helping and attracting SWDs to many extra-curriculum activities, giving them positive thinking and energy.

“I am very appreciative with the volunteer help from my friends at the Hoa Da Club. They have helped me and other SWDs a lot from the documentary procedures such as asking the university to change class rooms. They also organize various activities for us to join which make us feel cheerful and included.” (*A male student with seeing impairment from USSH*)

“The lecturers and staff members are giving favorable conditions for us. They allow us to change from written tests to oral tests or essays which are very helpful for us because for a student like me who have to write with my left hand, I cannot write fast and cannot fulfill the test in time.” (*A male student with physical disability from USSH*)

“Before the Lunar New Year holidays I had a chance to meet and talk to the Rector of my university who kindly held a meeting to see and share with all of us, SWDs. We received some small presents from the university which make us feel warmer.” (*A female student with seeing impairment from ULIS*)

That is the reason why 97% of respondents felt positive or very positive with their experience in university, and only 1 student (3%) felt it negative as shown in Table 6. During the group discussions this one student was found and asked for the

reasons why she gave the negative evaluation.

“I have only one leg and I always feel unconfident with such disability. However most of my classmates and teachers don’t notice my disabled situation. I do not join any activities held by the university which makes me got bad marks for the behavior point. I feel upset about this fact.” (A female student with physical disabilities from ULIS)

Table 6: Learning experience as a SWD at the university

	Male N = 11	Female N = 24	Total N = 35
Very negative	-	-	-
Negative	-	3% (1)	3% (1)
Positive	25% (9)	58% (20)	83% (29)
Very positive	6% (2)	8% (3)	14% (5)

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A. Policies for SWDs

It is found that although being under the same umbrella of VNU each affiliated university has its own recruitment policy towards PWDs. This situation on the one hand creates a rather flexible regime for the member universities to make decisions on the appropriate admission methods applied to SWDs that are suitable with the situation of each institution. However, on the other hand it may bring about difficulties for PWDs in searching and absorbing information when there are differences among the policies of VNU’s members.

Financial issues are another problem facing SDWs during the course of their study at higher education level due to the fact that many SWDs come from the rural areas or from families with financial difficulties. However since 2015 with the issuance of Decree No 86/2015/ND-CP on mechanism for collection and management of tuition fees applicable to educational institutions, disabled students would only be exempted from tuition fee payments if their families have a Certificate of poor or near poor. However in reality most SWDs themselves have to face with financial difficulties in paying for the tuition fees and daily expenses although their parents or families may not be certified as poor or near poor ones. This fact lays another obstacle for SWDs to successfully complete their higher education study.

B. Hard learning environment for SWDs

From the case of VNUH and its member universities it is clear that Vietnamese universities have not created an inclusive learning environment for SWDs in terms of accessibility and infrastructure. Disabled students have to face with a lot of difficulties and obstacles in terms of the availability of learning resources and accessibility to and within the university campus causing negative impacts on their study and research. This fact requires the attention and investment of not only institutional leaders and managers but also calls for the involvement of both national and ministerial bodies in order to allocate sufficient financial resources and make sufficient policies to develop these important components of university campuses. More specifically, pathways for wheelchairs, elevators, standard toilets for PWDs, Braille learning materials and Braille signs at public places, among others need to be invested in in the coming near time to come [5].

C. Soft learning environment for SWDs

Although most of SWDs in the case of VNU seem to be satisfied with their experience at the university, there are still spaces for improvement. Lecturers and staff members who interact with SWDs on a daily basis should have opportunities to take part in training courses to have skills in communicating and interacting with SWDs who may have special needs and supports. There should also be more activities and movements within university campuses so as to raise the awareness of all institutional stakeholders including managers, lecturers, staff members, students and parents towards the need for creating a more inclusive environment for SWDs and that it is the responsibility of everyone. The role of student clubs and youth union is very important and should be emphasized and promoted in not only helping SWDs in study but also in joining the community and having confidence, joyfulness as well as making the most of their ability.

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HƯỚNG TỚI MÔI TRƯỜNG HỌC TẬP HÒA NHẬP CHO SINH VIÊN KHUYẾT TẬT BẬC ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM: NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP ĐẠI HỌC QUỐC GIA HÀ NỘI

Tóm tắt: Với số lượng 6,1 triệu người chiếm 7,8% dân số cả nước, Việt Nam là một trong những quốc gia có số lượng người khuyết tật (NKT) cao nhất. Ở cấp độ giáo dục đại học, tỉ lệ NKT là cực kỳ thấp với chỉ 0,1% NKT đã hoàn thành một chương trình cử nhân. Mục đích của bài viết là nghiên cứu thực trạng môi trường học tập tại các cơ sở giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam, tập trung vào Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội (ĐHQGHN) như một trường hợp nghiên cứu. Cụ thể hơn, bài viết trước hết xem xét các chính sách của nhà trường đối với NKT. Sau đó, bài viết chỉ ra những khó khăn và trở ngại mà các sinh viên khuyết tật (SVKT) phải đối mặt bằng cách phân tích dữ liệu được thu thập qua các cuộc phỏng vấn sâu và điều tra khảo sát đối với SVKT tại ĐHQGHN. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy vấn đề của NKT đã được quy định trong một số văn bản chính sách của nhà trường. SVKT nhìn chung nhận được sự quan tâm của các trường đại học thành viên, cán bộ giảng viên, đoàn thanh niên, hội sinh viên, các câu lạc bộ và bạn học. Tuy nhiên, về cơ sở vật chất và khả năng tiếp cận, còn nhiều rào cản và khó khăn cần được cải thiện, đặc biệt là với sự hỗ trợ của các công nghệ mới. Vấn đề này cần nhận được sự quan tâm và đầu tư mạnh mẽ hơn từ nhà trường cũng như các cơ quan cấp bộ và chính phủ.

Từ khóa: Sinh viên khuyết tật, Giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, Môi trường giáo dục hoà nhập.