Promoting higher education for the bind in Asia

“I thought that I could not be an independent person with my blindness, but now I can see I have changed a lot. I feel that I am stronger, braver, and more independent. I can also decide whatever I want to do by myself. I am so happy and I want to share this with my friends.” (Soeum Navy, student beneficiary, Cambodia.)

As a donor, seeing the changes in our recipients is the most rewarding result of our past 10 years of support for the higher education program for the blind, which has been just selected as "Zero Project Innovative Practice 2017[[1]](#footnote-1)"! – huge congratulations to Dr. Larry Campbell and Dr. M.N.G. Mani, who lead the higher education program and serve as the President Emeritus and CEO of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI[[2]](#footnote-2)), the program’s implementing organization.

According to ICEVI and Overbrook School for the Blind, less than 1% of blind and visually impaired students qualified for higher education were enrolled in post-secondary education in the East and West Asia regions in 2005. Students who were enrolled at university had no accessible learning materials; assistive technology was virtually non-existent for most students and a high percentage of those who somehow managed to struggle through were forced to drop out when they reached the thesis level where independent research was required.

When we first received the proposal for a higher education program for the blind from Dr. Campbell, we thought the impact of the project could go beyond merely providing the opportunity to access higher education: rather, it could be the key to changing people’s mindset toward inclusion. This way of thinking was learned from our Chairman Yohei Sasakawa’s lifelong mission to eliminate leprosy, in that the ultimate challenge is against stigma rooted in generations, and the only solution is to change people’s attitudes and mindset. What blind students all needed was the opportunity to experience first setting a goal and then achieving it. We thought higher education would be an ideal way to provide this opportunity, because students need to challenge themselves to obtain a successful experience.

In fact, there were some who doubted the feasibility of supporting higher education in countries where even primary education was still not universal, and much of the support at that time was focused on primary education under the world-wide initiative “Education for All”. However, thanks to the continuous efforts of Dr. Campbell, Dr. Mani and the local partners involved in the project, the on-going ICEVI higher education project started in 2006 in Indonesia as a pilot program, gradually expanding to the Philippines and Vietnam in 2009, to Cambodia in 2010, to Myanmar in 2013, and to Laos in 2014. In these six countries the number of blind students enrolled in higher education has grown from 314 in 2007 to 2,142 in 2016. Furthermore, the project has, since 2013, included specific efforts to expand employment opportunities for university graduates in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam with 117 having successfully transitioned to gainful employment.

We are proud of the project not just for those great numbers, but also for the students who challenged themselves to enter and complete their studies at a university as well as obtaining the jobs they wanted. Let us take a moment to look beyond those numbers. There are some valuable lessons to be learned from this regional initiative that may be helpful to others as they promote inclusive policies and practices to address some of the most common barriers that have so often kept the doors to higher education closed for persons with disabilities.

**Assistive Technology and Accessible Learning Materials**

Initially, this was viewed by all countries as the most critical barrier to inclusive higher education.  It also turned out to be the easiest and fastest challenge to address and one that gets easier each year. With the greatly improved NVDA free open-source screen reader and the ever-decreasing cost of netbook computers, assistive technology quickly became less and less of a problem. Students now have access to information on computers and feel confident in the classroom because they no longer need to rely on their classmates as learning materials are easily made available to them in accessible format.

These developments, along with expanded access to learning materials produced in the DAISY-EPUB standard and the adoption of the Marrakesh Treaty, are making accessible material production more manageable. Today, the technology industry is increasingly building “out of the box” accessibility features into their products and the blind students are beginning to having access to textbooks with graphics and complex formulas, yet challenges in producing “born accessible” e-books still remain due to cost and the motivation of publishers.

**The University Environment and Public Policy**

Changing attitudes and public policy has been a serious and on-going challenge in all countries participating in this regional higher education network. We recognized from the outset that while the specific circumstances contributing to this major barrier varied from country to country, by working together and learning from each other in a “south-south” dialogue and exchange we were more likely to achieve greater progress more quickly. We also agreed that from the outset we would approach this with a positive attitude and not attribute “dark motives” to the exclusionary policies we were encountering.

Our partners in Indonesia have used a university-to-university mentoring approach in which partner universities that have successfully developed an inclusive and welcoming environment are paired with other universities that are just embarking on that journey. We have learned from this experience that the rector of one university is more likely to be convinced of the value of inclusion by a fellow rector than by any external team of education specialists. This approach, along with a concerted project-led effort by an Indonesian DPO task force, has recently resulted in Decree #46, August 2016, directing all universities to become inclusive universities.

**Transition to Gainful Employment**

 In 2013 a small working group was established to look more deeply into why so many young blind individuals with the skills, intellect, and the educational background to qualify for competitive employment were failing to find employment. The working group concluded that while misunderstandings, stereotypes, and fears on the part of potential employers were a major factor, there was a common critical weakness within many of the students. This was identified as the lack of “soft-skills” like self-confidence, clearly defined career goals, interpersonal communication skills, networking abilities, emotional stability, etc.

While working closely with university placement offices as well as government and private job placement agencies to assure that persons with disabilities are included in all job recruitment programs, special emphasis on strengthening soft skills not only helped 117 graduates secure employment after graduating, it also changed the attitudes of co-workers who became convinced by the capability of their blind colleagues. The graduates have regained confidence in everyday life, not limited to their own community but also involving interactions with people with different backgrounds. Higher education is an important transitioning phase in building this foundation. **Here[[3]](#footnote-3)** is a video featuring interviews with successfully employed ICEVI project beneficiaries and their coworkers.

**Development of a “mathematics video package”**

What is next? The choice of major for blind students still tends to be limited to art-related subjects. In fact, while developments in the field of assistive technology have opened many new job opportunities for blind persons, students require a stronger background in mathematics to take advantage of these career opportunities. As a mathematician himself, Dr. Mani points out: “Because most teachers, particularly those in inclusive classrooms, do not have the skills and knowledge to modify instructional strategies when teaching math and science to blind students, they often discourage students from studying these subjects.” ICEVI is convinced that this inherent weakness rests not with the student abilities, but with the abilities of their teachers. In an effort to address this situation the higher education project has embarked on a new program element in collaboration with three international partners.  Currently, this group is piloting the development of a “mathematics video package” that will help classroom teachers everywhere effectively modify instructional strategies in order to teach mathematics concepts more effectively. Sample videos will be available in mid-2017, and as the project proceeds will be made available on the internet to teachers everywhere.

Overall, we would like to emphasize that regardless of how advanced technology becomes in increasing opportunities for education and employment, a truly inclusive society cannot be achieved without a paradigm shift with regard to persons with disabilities. Dr. Campbell looked back on the past 10 years and said, “Mani and I have seen the evolution of the project contributing to the transformation of young visually impaired college students into strong leaders.  The project also has a positive impact on blind and visually impaired students at all levels of the education spectrum. As parents of children with visual impairment encounter beneficiaries of this program in their own community who are confident, well-educated and employed they are encouraged to send their visually impaired children to school, thus increasing demand for education.  Therefore, the Nippon Foundation – ICEVI Higher Education initiative is not simply a project but a silent movement empowering persons with visual impairment”. The Nippon Foundation is also grateful for ICEVI’s longtime partnership and especially glad to see that the impact of this project is starting to expand to influencing teachers, co-workers, and policy makers, and the momentum for providing higher education has now gone beyond the regional level and reached the global level with its inclusion in Goal 4 for sustainable development.

1. http://zeroproject.org/about-the-innovative-practices/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://icevi.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hKOgINQfos [↑](#footnote-ref-3)