



**INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION OF
PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT**

**A STUDY OF THE
PRESENT STATUS OF
HIGHER EDUCATION OF PERSONS
WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN THE
ASIA REGION**

May 2006

Introduction:

UNESCO's Education Report for the 21st century states that higher education is one of the most important factors in the economic development of any country. The overall development of any nation depends on the number of persons who undergo higher education. This is equally important in the case of persons with visual impairment as most are capable of performing on par with sighted persons in various fields if given appropriate primary and secondary education and encouraged to pursue higher education.

The trend in globalization has significantly changed the situation in higher education in recent years. Increased privatization of higher education combined with a reduction of government funding has meant that higher education is becoming costlier and less affordable for students with visual impairment who more often come from poorer households.

As the enrolment of students with visual impairment at the secondary (high school) level has increased so have the number of blind and low vision students seeking higher education. Provision of higher education to students with visual impairment will foster more blind leaders and more positive role models for younger students and for the community at-large. These anticipated attitude changes by parents and the general public regarding the capabilities of persons with visual impairment will lead to more inclusive schools and communities.

ICEVI felt the need to determine what barriers face blind and low vision persons seeking higher education and from those findings what strategies could be developed to address these barriers.

Need for higher education voiced:

ICEVI has been actively involved in the Asia, Africa, and Latin America regions over the past three years in implementing awareness creation programs regarding the capabilities of persons with visual impairment and also building the capacities of thousands of teachers. In 2003 and 2004 alone, ICEVI trained more than 6,000 teachers and other personnel who in turn assisted over 90,000 children with visual impairment through the funds made available by Drs. Richards Charles and Esther Yewpick Lee Charitable Foundation and matched by other donors. Many of our project partners have expressed the need to do more to assist qualified children with visual impairment to attain higher education. The need to promote higher education as a tool in developing young leaders in the blindness community has been raised as a recommendation at many recent international conferences.

ICEVI's initiative to study the present status of higher education:

ICEVI has undertaken this study of the present status of higher education of persons with visual impairment in the Asia region in order to generate a dialog on suggested strategies to foster the development of higher education services for persons with visual impairment. Data has been gathered from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, The Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam either through interviews or through questionnaires. The responses to our questionnaire are summarized below.

Number of persons with visual impairment currently enrolled in higher education:

Table 1
Number Students with Visual Impairment Pursuing Higher Education

No.	Country	Blind persons in higher education	Low Vision persons in higher education	TOTAL
1	Afghanistan	5	No separate category mentioned	5
2	Bangladesh	No separate category mentioned	No separate category mentioned	400
3	China	330	300	630
4	Hong Kong	8	17	25
5	India	1100	100	1200
6	Indonesia	No separate category mentioned	No separate category mentioned	250
7	Maldives	2	3	5
8	Nepal	No separate category mentioned	No separate category mentioned	52
9	Pakistan	30	35	65
10	Philippines	30	2	32
11	Sri Lanka	25	35	60
12	Thailand	150	50	200
12	Vietnam	28	0	28
TOTAL				2952

This data reveals a number of interesting points. The percentage of children with visual impairment enrolled in higher education is <3% of the number who enroll at the primary level. China, India, and Indonesia are among the largest countries in the world and it is a matter of concern that so few visually impaired children who have access to education make it into higher education. As currently only 10% of children with visual impairment have access to any type of education, the percentage of children entering into higher education when compared with the total population of persons with visual impairment is not even 0.5%. There is no doubt that **most of these individuals are not able to go in for higher education because of financial and other barriers, although they have the capability to pursue higher education.** This calls for a dramatic effort to change the current situation so that significant numbers of qualified students with visual impairment will have the opportunity to access higher education during the next decade.

Openness of Institutes of Higher Education:

Responses were mixed on the question regarding the openness of universities and institutes of higher education to students with visual impairment. In Hong Kong and India, all universities are open to higher education opportunities for qualified persons with visual impairment. In Thailand some universities have actually set aside a specific number of places for qualified blind persons and Thai “open universities” are quite accessible to all blind and low vision students who wish to pursue higher education. In China however, only 4 Universities are admitting visually impaired students these students for higher education and then only in a very limited number of fields of study. Therefore, **sensitization of the higher education institutions about the capabilities** of persons with visual impairment is an important need. The task of improving higher education should work at two levels: 1.) to create awareness among higher education institutions to admit persons with visual impairment and 2.) to provide scholarship assistance to persons with visual impairment to pursue higher education.

Nature of support received in higher education institutions:

There are different kinds of support needed for persons with visual impairment to pursue higher education. Supports such as tuition assistance, transportation assistance, provision of brailers, low vision devices, reader services, assistive technology, reservations in admission, fee concessions, etc., vary widely in the region. Many of the countries responding to this research study indicated that tuition assistance is available for persons with visual impairment, whereas other types of assistance are generally not available. China, Hong Kong, and Vietnam indicate that support services are available when a person with visual impairment joins higher educational institute; however, with the exception of Hong Kong this assistance may

be more available in theory than in actuality. In Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and India, the student must arrange for most of their support services on their own. Since these support services involve finance, it is unlikely they will become a reality without some financial and/or material assistance to the student, the university in which s/he studies or to a local NGO who may be encouraged to provide those supports.

Legislation pertaining to higher education:

No country participating in this research indicated any specific legislation pertaining to the promotion of higher education of persons with visual impairment. This does not necessarily mean that it does not exist; but it does indicate that if such legislation exists it is not widely known and/or enforced. In India, the Persons with Disabilities Act 1995 indicates the importance of education at all levels. In Indonesia, there appears to be a policy for education in general, but the implementation seems to be slow. Although no specific legislation on higher education seems to be in place in most countries, higher education is provided in most countries.

Availability of Braille books for higher education:

Most of the countries reported that the lack of availability of Braille textbooks and other materials presents a significant challenge to blind students in higher education. As most of the Braille presses in the respective countries are focusing on school textbook production for students in primary and secondary education little effort is being made to produce books for higher education. If the promotion of higher education is to become a serious initiative this challenge needs to be dealt with. There are many alternatives that might be looked at, including but not limited to: -work with existing Braille presses, -small production units within a “disabilities support service” at specific universities, -efforts with local NGO’s and/or volunteer groups, provision of embossing equipment to students, -organized file sharing and development of websites where Braille ready materials can be downloaded etc. Whatever approaches are used collaboration and sharing will be key elements in keeping costs down and production up. The initial task of producing many titles will be difficult but with appropriate technology and cooperation between organizations of blind persons, local NGO’s and universities this barrier can be significantly lower if not completely eliminated. Over time a growing and accessible collection of Braille-ready files and possible copyright legislation can help Braille readers in higher education enormously and accelerate access to higher education.

Use of Technology in Higher Education:

Today technology is capable of making the seemingly impossible a possibility. However, with the exception of Hong Kong, and to a lesser extent Thailand, most blind or low vision students in higher education do not have access to these technologies. However, an increasingly large number of students in many of the

countries involved in this study are now learning to use these technologies during their secondary education but do not have access to them when they move on to the university. As technology has tremendous use in helping students access materials for a learner in higher education, these technologies along with training for those who have not been previously exposed is probably one of the most important contributions that could be made to assist students already in higher education and to encourage others to pursue higher education.

The challenge with technology will be to find affordable program models that address three critical factors: 1. the right hardware and software, 2. training for the user (if they do not already have it) and 3. assuring that there are sufficient numbers of trained technicians to handle the maintenance and repair of these technologies. In Southeast Asia the ON-NET program has created a good foundation that could be used to support expanded use of technology in higher education but this represents only a small number of the countries in the Asia region. There are now a growing number of qualified trainers and a more limited number of well-trained technicians in the ASEAN countries. Increasingly other countries in Asia are developing good technology instructors; although the shortage of trained technicians is still a region-wide challenge that needs to be addressed. Other issues such as exploring bulk purchasing power and the development of model loan schemes are factors that should be explored as this critical issue is addressed. A one-time investment in computers with screen readers and magnification software for a visually impaired students in higher education would make an enormous difference for students now struggling to keep up with the benefit of such technology. However, this would need to be done with the understanding that this is a university responsibility and maintenance and expansion the program over time was that of the university or the national or local government.

Preferred courses by persons with visual impairment:

Specific higher education courses such as teaching, law, social work, language arts, economics, music, etc., are preferred by students with visual impairment in most of the countries. In China, Chinese medicine and English are also popular. Civics and theology are areas of higher education preferred by students in Indonesia. From the responses we have received, it is obvious that most students pursue studies in the humanities at the higher education level. With the growth of technology, other subjects may also become options of the students in the future. The possibility of mathematics, statistics, and other abstract subjects may also be thought of for the future.

Estimated expenditure for higher education:

The cost of higher education in the countries participating in this study represent quite a large range, as one might expect. These estimates are summarized in table 2 below.

Table 2
Estimated annual expenditure for pursuing Higher Education

S. No.	Country	Annual Cost (In US Dollars)
1	Afghanistan	700
2	Bangladesh	550
3	China	1500
4	Hong Kong	20000
5	India	600
6	Indonesia	650
7	Maldives	900
8	Nepal	500
9	Pakistan	550
10	Philippines	700 – 2000
11	Sri Lanka	600
12	Thailand	1500
12	Vietnam	Not given

Among these countries, expense for higher education in Nepal is the lowest and Hong Kong is the highest.

Challenges:

In addition to the investigation of the present status of higher education, this study looked at the practical problems that are encountered by persons with visual impairment in pursuing higher education. According to persons with visual impairment and service providers, the following major challenges need to be addressed, if higher education of persons with visual impairment is going to expand significantly in the Asia region.

- Reading materials including that of Braille books must be made available.

- Provision of financial assistance is necessary to meet the costs involved in higher education such as reader services, teaching-learning materials, transportation etc.
- Provision of assistive technology (hardware and software).
- Training in the use of assistive technology and provision of technical support services for maintenance and repair.
- Development of university based “disabled student support services”.
- Creation of job opportunities in consultation with companies is important in assuring those that complete higher education are able to use that knowledge to become economically independent.
- Creating a positive outlook among the administrators that “persons with visual impairment can pursue higher education” is vital and therefore, public education campaigns should be part of any effort to promote higher education.

There are many ways of approaching these issues and eliminating the barriers that now confront blind and low vision student enrolled in or hoping to enroll in higher education in Asia. ICEVI wants to make higher education an important part of the global initiative on “education for all” that we will launch in 2006.

The need for higher education among persons with visual impairment is undisputed. An investment on higher education will make a big difference in the services for persons with visual impairment in the years to come. An investment today will produce hundreds of visually impaired leaders in the near future.