

Are All Tertiary Institutes in Hong Kong Ready to Provide Dyslexic Students with Suitable Special Examination Arrangements?

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Abstract

This paper discusses whether all tertiary institutes in Hong Kong are ready to provide dyslexic students with suitable special examination arrangements. Various challenges are identified. More efforts are warranted to establish a system with the necessary and appropriate professional support for analyzing the requests for examination arrangements. Only then can students with special educational needs truly benefit.

Keywords: dyslexia, special examination arrangements, tertiary education, Hong Kong

Students with dyslexia have special educational needs (SEN). No matter they are studying in pre-school, primary, secondary or tertiary education, they should be given appropriate special examination arrangements (SEA).

In Hong Kong, provision of SEA for students with dyslexia has been driven by the government policy. The Disability Discrimination Ordinance Code of Practice on Education (Department of Justice, 2013) stipulates that whenever feasible, reasonable accommodation in the current programs, services, facilities and benefits has to be given to students with SEN including those with dyslexia. The SEA belongs to one of the reasonable accommodation for students with dyslexia which targets to get rid of the disadvantages caused specifically by dyslexia but not by anything else such as those pertaining to the actual competencies in grasping the knowledge or skills being assessed. The premises are that there must not be any unfairness to other students or any interference with the objectives of the assessment concerned.

In addition to referring to the guidelines including “Principles and Strategies for

Assessment for Students with Special Educational Needs in Ordinary Schools” published by

Education and Manpower Bureau (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004), the school should take the actual difficulties encountered by the corresponding students and the advice from educational psychologist into consideration when making the decision of internal SEA. When parents find any disagreement between them and the school in such decision, they can contact Education Bureau for help. The followings are some examples of the SEA:

- extending examination time;
- enlarging the spaces in answer sheet for writing answers;
- enlarging the font size of examination papers;
- reading out the questions to students for non-language subjects;
- allowing use of a special room under separate invigilation;
- alternative method of answering (e.g. oral response, circling the answers);
- use of computer for word processing; and
- supervised breaks.

As for public examination, students with dyslexia can apply to Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) for SEA. In addition to completing an application form, it is a must to provide an up-to-date

assessment report signed by a qualified psychologist (educational or clinical) and the school principal. The up-to-date assessment report should include the results of the assessment conducted within three years prior to the public examination. The HKEAA Task Group on SEA has the rights to approve or reject the application. Candidates who are dissatisfied with the decision can appeal by giving reasons and additional evidence (in supporting documents, for instance) to The Appeal Panel for Special Needs. Appeal results should be available before the examination. Types of SEA if deemed necessary are recommended. Some examples include:

- providing additional time;
- allowing writing on only one side of an answer book, or on alternate lines or circling multiple choice answers on a question paper;
- providing special format question papers, e.g. one-side printing or enlarged fonts;
- specially arranged centre (e.g. in a classroom instead of a hall);
- special seating in a centre (e.g. near the front or back of an examination centre);
- supervised breaks in examinations lasting 90 minutes or more; and
- other special arrangements such as use of computer in answering questions.

Some efforts have also been paid to tertiary education to provide SEA. For example, a SEN Task Force in Vocational Training Council has been established to cater SEN students with equal learning opportunities such as providing SEA as a reasonable accommodation, and to facilitate staff to support those students including managing SEA applications (Tse, 2005; Vocational Training Council, 2012).

Although there is a handbook with the guideline for SEA which was developed some years ago by the concerted efforts of the major local institutes and has since then been used/referred across them, other institutes having not engaged cannot benefit from it and even do not know that it exists. There are good practices in those major schools. For instance, there is a designated unit in University of Hong Kong to coordinate SEA (Centre of Development and Resources for Students, 2016). A letter of recommendations on reasonable accommodation after reviewing individual student's situations is issued to the corresponding Faculty and Examinations Office for approval and implementation. This letter which expires annually has to be renewed according to the student's current situations so that the SEA can be reviewed and fine-tuned to better suit and satisfy his updated needs. Unfortunately, there seems no mechanism for handling requests of SEA in those non-major institutes. For the sake of fairness, the practices among institutes should be similar though not necessarily identical so as to allow leeway/flexibility.

As its name tells, SEA is special that it is not the same as the normal one. Hence, it does not make much sense to refer to the rules and regulations applied to students without SEN (unluckily, some staff in charge of SEA do so). Nonetheless, the SEA should be judged by the legitimate professional(s) concerned such as medical doctors, educational psychologists, occupational therapists and speech therapists (same as what is being done for public examination) according to the here and now situations. The SEA granted in public examinations should however at most be regarded as reference only and thus should not be automatically "extended" to those in tertiary education.

A main concern also lies with the process for analyzing the request for SEA and hence for approving/disapproving it. Actually, if rejection of all or part(s) of the request is decided without sound/valid justification, it of course will not be fair to the student. Moreover, if any appeal or even complaint (e.g. to Equal Opportunities Commission) then comes out, it will cause troubles (may even be unbearable) to the institute. Therefore, no matter it is for the sake of fairness to the SEN students or for the safe-guard of the institute, it is necessary to handle each and every case with extra cautions. Frankly, authority is the "game rule" of SEA. Everybody involved needs to know that under the "game", what kinds of personnel are regarded as professionals (actually not negotiable, i.e. if they are they are, even anyone who thinks that he himself is but actually he is not recognized under this "game", he can never be) and their advice/suggestions are indeed authoritative. Normally, such "instructions" are to be followed unless there is an even more authoritative piece of judgment to override the decision.

To conclude, more efforts have to be paid for establishing a system with the necessary and appropriate professional support for analyzing the requests for SEA. Only then can students with SEN truly benefit.

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