

Integrating Bottom-Up Advocacies and Top-Down Lead: An Effective Means to Enhance Disability Inclusion for University Staff

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Abstract

It is often debated whether the inclusion issues for university staff with disabilities should be advocated bottom-up by users, or initiated top-down by senior management. The following motivating example illustrates that these two options are not mutually exclusive. A new entrance gate was designed to allow mainstream students the ease of access to the eastern part of The University of Hong Kong via escalators. However, elevator access was not feasible because of the landscape. We started off submitting our concern to middle management about the inaccessibility to people with disabilities (PwDs). The middle management explained the difficulties due to budgetary and human resources issues. They recommended alternative routes that were long and winding. The present author is a PwD and a long-term campaigner for disability inclusion. He realized the need to approach the Executive Vice-President (EVP) directly, albeit with persuasive dialogues rather than through legal confrontation. The EVP understood the importance of the University's corporate image and social assets, and concurred with our position. The bottom-up advocacy was integrated amiably with top-down leadership. A

universally accessible plan was drawn up quickly. In the main paper, we will report various qualitative case studies in detail to illustrate the merits of integrating grassroots advocacy and top decision makers in rehabilitation design.

This paper is part of a series of articles by Rehabilitation Alliance Hong Kong (RAHK), which is an NGO and Disabled People's Organization administered by people with diverse disabilities as well as people in the mainstream. We have over 5500 members with physical disabilities, visual impairments, hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, mental challenges, chronic illnesses, as well as mainstream people who share our common goal for better quality of life for everybody. We examine the policies and administrative issues in rehabilitation, with a view to advocating disability inclusion and mainstreaming.

We operate a 7-Eleven Social Enterprise Store at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. It aims to promote open employment of PwDs and enhance their confidence and abilities. It was one of the first two social enterprises established in Hong Kong. It was selected by HBR as an MBA case study.

Keywords: disability inclusion, disability mainstreaming, university staff, people with disabilities (PwDs), accessibility, bottom-up advocacy, top-down leadership, methods integration, rehabilitation design, universal design, qualitative case study

Integrating Bottom-Up Advocacies and Top-Down Lead: An Effective Means to Enhance Disability Inclusion for University Staff

Introduction

I BUILD, therefore I am

We begin the paper with a paraphrase of the well-known metaphysical statement “I think, therefore I am” by the 17th Century French philosopher René Descartes, who claimed that his existence was proven by thinking and doing. Our paraphrase means that existence is verified by designing and implementing. Based on this preamble, we propose an acronym “**BUILD**” to represent “**bottom-up advocacies and top-down lead**” in order to avoid a mouthful during presentation.

We will present a number of name-dropping examples in this paper. Our purpose is to show successful advocacy as well as long roads ahead. In any case, we hope that our experience will be helpful to readers.

Integrating BUILD to Enhance Disability Inclusion in Universities

It is often debated whether the inclusion issues for university staff and students with disabilities should be advocated bottom-up by users, or initiated top-down by senior management. The present author has been recognized internationally as the pioneer of *methods integration (MI)* in software specifications and design (Bruel et al., 1999, Tse, 1991). In this paper, we would like to extend MI to rehabilitation design, including disability inclusion, disability mainstreaming, and universal accessibility. We illustrate that the two options in BUILD, namely bottom-up advocacies and top-down lead, are not mutually exclusive. We have conducted qualitative case studies to verify our proposal. The results show that MI may indeed be universal for all.

The contribution of this paper is sixfold: (i) we propose extending MI from software design to rehabilitation design; (ii) we review accessibility issues encountered by PwDs; (iii) we identify the constraints expressed by middle management; (iv) we illustrate the need for top management support; (v) we demonstrate the need for an iterative process; and (vi) we discuss the limitations and make recommendations for future work.

Qualitative Case Studies

Case Study (I): Integrating BUILD to Pursue Universal Design at The University of Hong Kong (HKU)

Our main case study reports on our fruitful experience integrating BUILD to strive for universal design at HKU.

Rapid Expansion of the University

The HKU campus has been expanding very rapidly in recent years due “World-class scholarship and innovation” (President’s Office, n.d.). The University ranks no. 11 internationally in the 2026 global list by QS Top Universities (n.d.).

Thus, the number of staff members surged from 7199 in 2014/2015 (The University of Hong Kong, 2014, November) to 14,773 in 2024/2025 (The University of Hong Kong, 2025, September), representing an increase of 105.2 percent. The total student population grew from 27,933 in 2014/2015 (The University of Hong Kong, 2014, November) to 42,330 in 2024/2025 (The University of Hong Kong, 2025, September), representing an increase of 51.5 percent. Even more will be expected because the government has relaxed the ceiling for international students.

To meet the demands of the rapid expansion, new buildings are constructed throughout the University. The most prominent example in the Main Campus is “Tech Landmark” (Estates Office, n.d.), which is a HK \$2500 million (US \$320 million) project consisting of a cluster of four buildings with aesthetic glass façades, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1*Tech Landmark Development*

Note. Photo from *Tech Landmark Development* by Estates Office (n.d.).

Pedestrian Flow Issue and Proposed Solution at HKU Mass Transit Railway (MTR) Station

Access to the Main Campus by most staff and students was via the HKU MTR station situated at the West Gate. At the beginning or end of lectures, there were long queues at the elevators from the station to the Gate. To divert the traffic, staff and students were encouraged to use the Sai Ying Pun MTR station, followed by a short walk to the East Gate. New escalators were designed to allow staff and students to access the Tech Landmark and other buildings near the East Gate of HKU (Archify, n.d.). It was targeted for an “Accessibility Enhancement” of this Gate, allowing it to serve as a “Door of Wisdom” to “Intelligence” (Chinney, n.d.). See Figure 2.

Figure 2

New East Gate of The University of Hong Kong



Note. Photo from *HKU Reopens East Gate with Renovations and Preserved Heritage* by The University of Hong Kong (2025, March 25).

Multiple Access Issues for PwDs

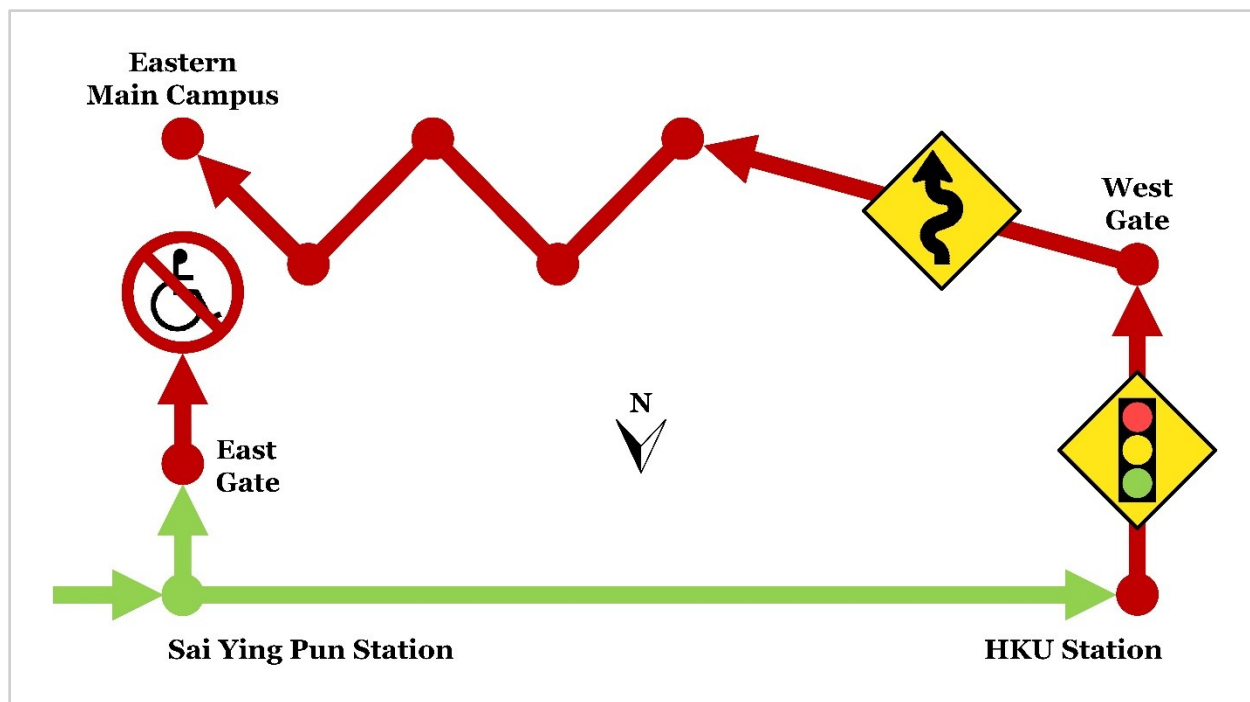
On the other hand, accessibility considerations for people with disabilities (PwDs) were noticeably missing. We expressed our concern to the architects and various heads of departments. They explained that elevators, usually constructed underneath escalators, were not feasible because of the hilly landscape. They recommended in their press release that “Individuals with specific needs may use the lifts at MTR HKU Station exits A1/A2 as an accessible route to the Main Campus” (The University of Hong Kong, 2025, March 25).

However, the alternative was undesirable because (a) PwDs would continue to have long waits at the lifts in HKU MTR station, followed by (b) the need to go through a zig-zag route to reach the eastern parts of the main campus. Please refer to the schematic map in Figure 3 for a visual illustration. The official recommendation assumed that a PwD had more energy than the

average person, or every PwD was in an electric wheelchair or a manual wheelchair pushed by a personal assistant.

Figure 3

Schematic Map of Accessibility Issues at the East and West Gates.



Note. Schematic map designed by Prof. T.H. Tse. Road signs from *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways* by National Committee on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (2025, August 28). The intellectual property rights are explicitly waived by the authority.

Analogy Between the East Gate Today and the East Slope in China in AD 1081

The East Gate issue reminds us of the verse by Su Shi (蘇軾) in *Eight Poems from East Slope (With Preface)* (Su, 1081), which airs grievances during his painful exile. It has been translated into English by Watson (1994). To improve the metaphoric effect for this case study, we will slightly amend the English version as follows. The elegant Chinese original will not be affected.

*Who would willingly expend their strength,
Knowing in the end it won't be repaid?
Only a solitary traveler,
Hemmed in by a cruel twist of fate that must be obeyed.¹*

Integrating BUILD

We raised our deep concern to various heads of administrative departments. They explained the need to apply for funding from authorities, which would naturally take time. On the other hand, an imperfect solution to the access problem for staff and students was imminent and should not be shelved.

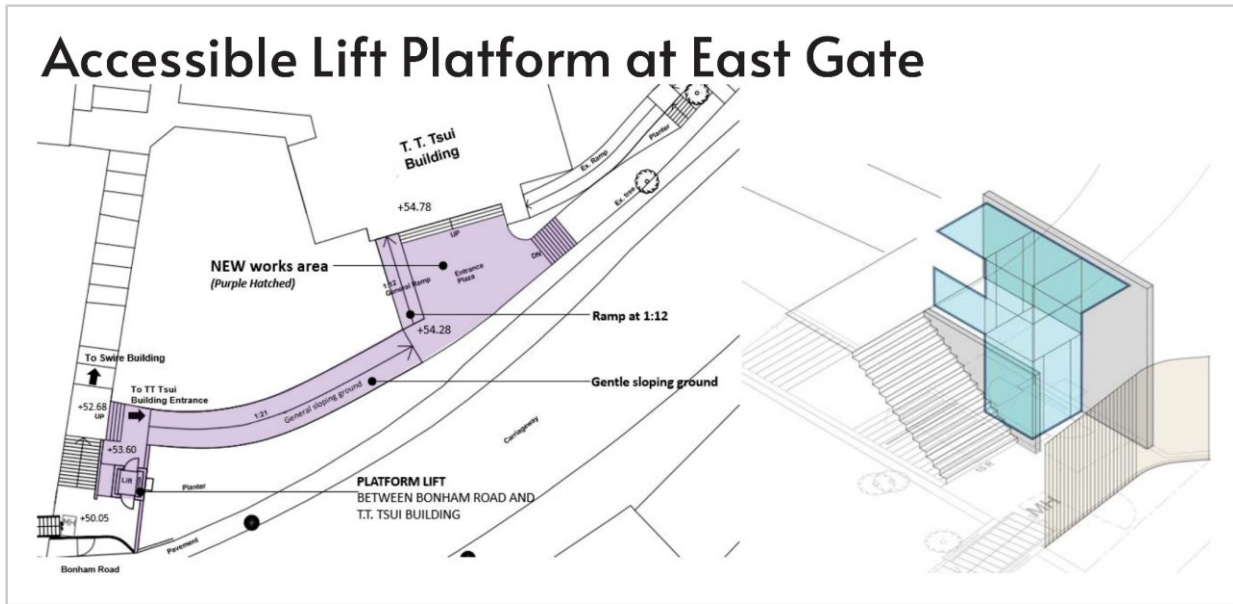
The present author is a PwD and a long-term campaigner for disability inclusion. He understood that middle management was usually constrained by budgeting and medium-term implementations. He realized the need to approach top management. He wrote a sincere email message to Prof. Wei Pan, Executive Vice-President (EVP) of HKU. The EVP fully understood the importance of the University's corporate image and social assets, and concurred with our position. The bottom-up advocacy was integrated seamlessly with top-down leadership. The architects organized a walk through with Dr. Joseph Kwan, Founder and Managing Director of UDA Consultants Ltd.; and Mr. Hanson Lee, a wheelchair user who was a previous Chairman of the Subcommittee on Access of the Government. Among potential solutions, a chairlift was considered *not* suitable for connecting East Gate with the level of major buildings because (–1) There would be a need for assistance when a PwD used the chairlift; and (–2) other pedestrians may be blocked when a PwD boards the chairlift. Hence, the team recommended (+1) the use of a lift platform as an interim measure, and (+2) the construction of a ramp in the long-term plan to facilitate universal access. Our initial attempt to integrate BUILD was very successful.

Unfortunately, the EVP and other university representatives in the team either left HKU or were transferred to other major positions, so that the solution was forgotten among a huge number construction projects at the University. The present author recognized the need to reiterate the process. He wrote to the Prof. Norman Tien, the new EVP; and to Mr. Sunny Yeung, the new Director of Estates for upward advocacy. Both senior colleagues were most supportive and draw up an architectural plan within short notice, as shown in Figure 4.

¹ “誰能捐筋力，歲晚不償勞。獨有孤旅人，天窮無所逃。” (Su, 1081)

Figure 4

Proposed Accessible Lift Platform at HKU East Gate



Note. Map and photo from HKU Director of Estates.

This case study also illustrates the advantages of networking and persuasive dialogues over legal means to resolve conflicts in rehabilitation design. In Hong Kong, the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (Cap 487) (DDO)² (Discrimination Laws, n.d., Hong Kong e-Legislation, 1996, May 20) prohibits direct and indirect discrimination against disabilities³ (Community Legal Information Centre, n.d.). On the other hand, we agree with the recommendation by Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) that it is usually more appropriate to settle such issues through mutual conciliation⁴, and resort to litigation through the court *only if* it is not successful (Equal Opportunities Commission, n.d., Reyes & Lui, 2022). We also support the EOC's emphasis on public education and training to foster attitude change (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2025, February).

Further Pursuit of Universal Design (UD)

Even with the improved accessibility plan for the East, PwDs and other pedestrians are treated separately and independently. This is a typical example of traditional barrier free access, which is often piecemeal and ad hoc.

The first classic design to integrate staircases and ramps into “stramps” was done by architect Arthur Erickson in 1979 at Robson Square, Vancouver, BC, Canada, as shown in Figure 5. It was a prize-winning piece of aesthetic architectural work. Many other architects throughout the world follow his pioneering design.

² “An Ordinance to render unlawful discrimination against persons on the ground of their or their associates’ disability in respect of their employment, accommodation, education, access to partnerships, membership of trade unions and clubs, access to premises, educational establishments, sporting activities and the provision of goods, services and facilities; to make provision against harassment and vilification of persons with a disability and their associates; to extend the jurisdiction of the Equal Opportunities Commission to include discrimination against persons on the ground of their or their associates’ disability, and for connected purposes” (Hong Kong e-Legislation, 1996, May 20).

³ “Discrimination can be direct or indirect. Direct discrimination occurs when, on the grounds of a disability, a person having a disability is treated less favourably than another person without the disability would be treated in similar circumstances. Indirect discrimination occurs when a condition or requirement is applied to everyone, but in practice affects people with a disability more adversely, is to their detriment, and such condition or requirement cannot be justified. ... Discrimination ... of persons with a disability (or their associates) is unlawful under the DDO.” (Community Legal Information Centre, n.d.)

⁴ “The purpose of conciliation is to bring the different parties together to look for ways to resolve the dispute. Conciliation looks for common ground to help resolve the matter to the satisfaction of both parties so that both can move beyond the dispute. As the conciliation process allows for both parties in the dispute to have their say, it is possible for each side to come to a better understanding of the other’s position. This can help to eliminate misunderstandings based on incorrect assumptions or information and to achieve a real change in attitude.” (Equal Opportunities Commission, n.d.)

Figure 5

Example of Stramps (Combination of Staircases and Ramps) in Robson Square, Vancouver, BC, Canada



Note. Photo from *Robson Square Waterfall* by Wikimedia Commons (2018, July 27). Adapted with authorization under License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

On the other hand, while stramps appear to be universally accessible, they are actually not suitable for PwDs. According to the accessibility consultant Arnold Cheng as reported by Johnston (2019, August 22), they are hazardous to PwDs because of the lack of handrails, steep gradients, inadequate landings, and the absence of tactile guides or color stripes.

Instead, for genuine UD, accessibility should be synchronously planned, synchronously designed, synchronously developed, and synchronously implemented for both mainstream people and PwDs. For example, no staircases or steps should be necessary if all people can enter buildings at the ground level.

We recognize that UD may not be feasible for existing buildings or when accessibility is designed as an afterthought. We look forward to bona fide UD in universities and other public places in the near future.

Case Study (II): Integrating BUILD to Salvage Social Enterprise at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU)

Rehabilitation Alliance Hong Kong (RAHK) operates a 7-Eleven Social Enterprise Store (SE Store) at PolyU, as illustrated in Figure 6. It aims to promote open employment of PwDs and enhance their confidence and abilities. It was one of the first two social enterprises established in Hong Kong. It was selected by HBR as an MBA case study (Tsai & Li, 2008, April 28).

Figure 6

RAHK Social Enterprise 7-Eleven Store at PolyU



Note. Plaque designed by Prof. T.H. Tse in 2019. Photo by RAHK.

Integrating BUILD to Tackle Challenges

In 2023, PolyU announced the redevelopment of Blocks VA and VS (Campus Development Office, n.d.-a), where our SE Store was located. RAHK was concerned because the employment opportunities of the disabled manager and workers would be challenged. The present author emailed to PolyU President Prof. Jin-guang Teng to express the concern. The President responded within 24 hours on a Sunday. He obviously did not realize that the 7-Eleven in their campus was an SE Store. He personally went to the store to buy a bottle of water,

which was very unusual for a president. He then asked Dr. Simon Wong, PolyU Vice-President, to follow up with our concern.

Dr. Wong treated us to lunch at Hotel ICON, which was their off-campus hospitality training venue. He confirmed the following logistics, which was another exciting success story for integrating BUILD:

(a) PolyU recommended RAHK to set up a pop-up shop at a convenient site. The size of the temporary site might not be vastly different from the current SE Store. In the meantime, we might discuss the relocation of our permanent site.

(b) In the light of the exceptional circumstances, PolyU would allow DFI Retail Group Holdings Limited, the holding company for 7-Eleven in Hong Kong, to renew our contract, giving them exceptional financial and social benefits. In exchange, DFI should allow RAHK to promote the social enterprise nature of our Store despite their stringent rules that would not allow non-standard advertising.

(c) PolyU would allow RAHK to sell lunch boxes on campus outside of our SE Store.

Unexpected Challenges Ahead

Unfortunately, several unexpected events occurred:

(i) There was a delay by RAHK staff in response to Dr. Wong's valuable recommendations due to heavy workloads.

(ii) Dr. Wong left PolyU and joined the Town Planning Board of Hong Kong.

(iii) Other senior management members were not aware of the recommendations of the former VP. In the end, PolyU decided to set up a new café in Blocks VA and VS before their demolition, under their own hospitality training venue Hotel ICON (Campus Development Office, n.d.-b).

Consequently, we will need to establish our contacts with the PolyU top management from scratch. The lesson learned is that we must respond immediately and proactively to golden opportunities.

Case Study (III): Integrating BUILD to Enhance Disability Inclusion Beyond Universities

It is important to note that integrating BUILD is not restricted to universities. We should further approach high-level Government officials, such as Legislative Council Members and Policy Secretaries of Government Bureaus for their top-down leadership of our bottom-up advocacy. For instance, we participated in the Summit for PwDs organized by Legislative Council Member Dr. C. Y. Tik in August 2025, and the invited meeting with Miss Rosanna S. P. Law, Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism in June 2025 as illustrated in Figure 7. In so doing, we can aim to integrate BUILD via networking and mingling with decision makers, and enhancing visibility by advocating contemporary rehabilitation design, including universal accessibility.

Figure 7

Networking with Legislative Council Member and Policy Secretary of Government Bureau



Note: Left photo shows Prof. T.H. Tse speaking at the Summit for PwDs organized by Legislative Council Member Dr. C. Y. Tik on August 2, 2025. Photo by Hong Kong PHAB Association. Right photo shows the meeting of RAHK representatives with Miss Rosanna S. P. Law, Secretary for Culture, Sports and Tourism on June 6, 2025, with Prof. T.H. Tse shown on the TV Screen. Photo by Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau.

Conclusion

Amid the debates as to whether bottom-up advocacies or top-down lead (BUILD) is better for improvements to meet societal needs, we extend methods integration in software design to rehabilitation design. We recommend that the integration of BUILD is an effective solution. We have presented qualitative case studies for PwD accessibility at The University of Hong Kong; the social enterprise at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University; and meetings with top officials in the Legislative Council and the Government. We have identified successful

experiences as well as long roads ahead. Iterations are indeed necessary. Lateral innovative thinking is recommended.

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