

Enhancing IT Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities for Young Vietnamese With Disabilities

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EDUCATION
CASE STUDY

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Cover: IT Training Program for People with Disabilities
brings opportunities for advanced IT skills training to young
Vietnamese with disabilities, like Hà Ngọc Doanh pictured here.
Photo by Sean Sprague for CRS

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Background

People living with disabilities (PWD) are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Vietnam. In addition to facing severe stigma, they experience enormous challenges accessing vocational training and employment opportunities. According to the Vietnam National Action Plan on Disability, 93.4 percent of working-age PWD (16–64 years) do not have a marketable professional qualification. Among those who have completed vocational training, only 60 percent were able to find jobs after their course. These figures illustrate how severely limited PWD's access to quality vocation training and job placement is.

Key Figures

Program launch: 2007

Number of participating schools: 3

Number of students with disabilities that completed IT training: 734

Number of students that completed advanced IT training: 509

Number of graduates with jobs: 430

Number of companies that have hired graduates: 150+

Number of companies that advise schools in curriculum development: approximately 30

The Information Technology Training Program for People (ITTP) with Disabilities was launched on May 11, 2007. Building on international best practice, it aimed to use information technology (IT) to increase PWD participation in the labor force. By February 2012, 24 groups (509 PWD, aged 16–30 years) had completed advanced IT courses in software engineering and computation at two sites in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). An additional 225 people with visual and hearing impairments had completed three-month basic IT courses. More than 80 percent of graduates (430 PWD) had found full-time employment or internships with government offices and more than 150 local and international companies.

The ITTP is a cooperative effort between Catholic Relief Services Vietnam (CRS) and two Vietnamese higher education institutions under the USAID-

funded Inclusion of Vietnamese with Disabilities project (2005–2014). The first ITTP site, the Hanoi College of Information Technology (ESTIH), began training students in May 2007. The second site, Van Lang University in HCMC, joined in 2009. The ITTP will open a third location in 2012, Dong A University in Da Nang. ITTP is designed as a system strengthening initiative, with academia, government, the private sector and civil society coordinating to develop a sustainable platform for PWD leadership and economic strengthening.

This case study documents some of ITTP's promising practices and lessons learned in getting PWD actively engaged in viable employment opportunities in Vietnam.

Enhancing Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities for Young Vietnamese with Disabilities

CRS works with local education and vocational training institutions to offer a variety of advanced IT training courses and job placement services to young Vietnamese with disabilities. University partnerships allow this training to be set up quickly within existing infrastructure. Recruiting like-minded and committed partners is essential for program sustainability.

CRS' training partners, ESTIH and Van Lang University, offer several IT courses for students with disabilities (SWD), including:

1. One-year courses:

- Advanced Software Engineering (Hanoi, HCMC)
- General IT Management (Hanoi)

2. Six-month courses:

- Advanced Graphic Design (HCMC)
- Architecture Engineering Design (HCMC)
- Website Development and Management for the deaf and hearing impaired (Hanoi)

3. Three-month courses:

- Advanced Training of Trainers for the blind and visually impaired (Hanoi, HCMC)
- Basic computer skills for the blind and visually impaired (Hanoi, HCMC)
- Basic computer skills for the deaf and hearing impaired (Hanoi)

ITTP students come from all regions of Vietnam. Students who live outside Hanoi and HCMC are provided with meals, transportation and housing near the school. In addition, a full-time social worker provides counseling and coaching in job readiness skills.



Twenty-five year old Le Thi Le's legs are partially paralyzed. She is studying at the Hanoi College of Information Technology. Her story seeks to reduce the stigma of the capabilities of people living with disabilities. *Photo by Sean Sprague for CRS*

The ITTP model has been piloted in Vietnam for more than four years and has evolved based on lessons learned. What follows is a summary of key transferrable recommendations according to program deliverables:

- A. Engage key stakeholders
- B. Prepare schools to train and support SWDs
- C. Target training to match the skills demanded by the labor market
- D. Engage SWDs with appropriate training methods
- E. Support SWDs outside the classroom
- F. Prepare and place SWDs in jobs
- G. Sustain and expand program impact

A. Engage Key Stakeholders

An effective vocational training program needs to consider many aspects—infrastructure renovation, curriculum design, technical training, soft skills training, student recruitment, job placement, fundraising, advocacy and more. Schools cannot and should not try to do everything alone. They need to build a network of support. Here are some key stakeholders that should be involved in the vocational training of PWD.

Disabled People Organizations (DPOs) and Other Civil Society Organizations

DPOs promote the full social inclusion of PWD. Vocational training and job placement are activities well-aligned with the DPO mission. ITTP demonstrated that DPOs are well able to provide technical assistance to mainstream Vietnamese schools, most of whom have little experience training and supporting PWD. Making DPOs a key member of the support network is an important step. It demonstrates consideration and respect while promoting PWD leadership and inclusion. In addition to technical advice, DPOs can also:

- Advertise the training programs,
- Recruit SWDs,

- Provide training in soft skills,
- Support job placement,
- Undertake advocacy and
- Support fund raising.

Civil society organizations may be interested in helping PWD achieve full social inclusion. Each organization brings a unique portfolio of expertise and resources to the table, from physical rehabilitation to advocacy. Proactive networking and careful coordination with like-minded organizations is an important way to ensure program quality and cost effectiveness.

Private Sector

Businesses benefit from skilled human resources. Unfortunately, many are reluctant to hire PWD. In order to ensure students find a job after graduation, it is essential to sensitize hiring managers. Businesses and vocational training centers are natural partners. The ITTP model uses Business Advisory Councils (BACs) to institutionalize this natural partnership and promote business participation in and joint ownership of the training program. The private sector contributes to ITTP through:

- Input into the design of training curricula,
- Hosting exposure visits, practicum and internships,
- Providing job preparatory trainings,
- Job placement and
- In-kind and cash support.

Alumni

Graduates often have a deep attachment to the program and are motivated to see it succeed. Alumni are great ambassadors, raising awareness of the program's achievements and value. They also make great role models,

as their life experiences parallel those of current students. In the ITTP model, alumni:

- Help schools recruit new students.
- Share their experiences with and motivate current students,
- Link graduating students to jobs and
- Participate in advocacy events to testify on the impact of the ITTP program on their lives.

It's not easy to find a rewarding job when a disability has eroded your confidence. That's why Luong Don credits his career to skills learned from the Technology Training Program (ITTP).

Don, who has a mobility disability, said a few years ago his job prospects were bleak. He was continually passed over for jobs suited to his physical abilities because he could not confidently convey his technical skills.



Don (pictured in the middle) has been successfully placed with Medi Links Global and provides IT support and training. *Photo by CRS Vietnam staff*

Seemingly short on options, Don then enrolled in the ITTP to learn IT skills. As a bonus, he picked up valuable life lessons that made him a more promising employee.

Upon graduating in March 2010 from the ITTP, Don passed Medi Links Global's strict job recruitment process and obtained a job in customer service.

Vu Manh Tien, director of Medi Links Global, said Don's job requires him to network and be dynamic to survey customers' and hospital demands, and to train others on software. There's no way he could succeed in the position just sitting in an office. Don is now one of Tien's most-valued employees.

Government

The government is the biggest provider of social welfare programs for marginalized populations in Vietnam. As such, government funding is one of the best hopes for long-term program sustainability. Under the current system, it is very difficult for schools outside the government-run rehabilitation and vocational training system to access funding for vocational training for PWD. CRS and ITTP schools continue to advocate for government policymakers to allow SWDs to use government funding to study outside of the government-run system.

CRS and ITTP schools also work with government agencies to document good practices from the ITTP model and encourage government-run training centers to try new approaches in their own PWD vocational training programs.

Technology Is the Key to Changing Lives

New technologies are bringing new opportunities to build a truly inclusive society. ITTP has demonstrated that when PWD have computer skills and access to the internet and assistive technologies (e.g. text-to-speech software) they can learn and work as well as their

non-disabled peers. This combination of technologies can help PWDs overcome barriers to education, training, and work and support them to lead more independent, productive and fulfilling lives.

The sight of PWD using modern technology to do advanced work also challenges the all-too-prevalent social stigma regarding disability. Over time, it is expected that more people will focus on PWD's *abilities* and cease fixating on their *disabilities*.



Buu is the first blind student of ITTP. Buu had completed the one-year long software programming course following the Indian NIIT training curriculum, and has opened his own IT service shop in his home town of Can Tho in southern Vietnam. *Photo by Sean Sprague for CRS*

B. Prepare Schools to Train and Support SWDs

Many schools and vocational training centers in Vietnam are poorly prepared to provide training for SWDs. As a result, CRS begins each new partnership with capacity strengthening activities for school management and training staff. These activities include:

Inclusive Education Management Training

Special education experts facilitate training sessions on special education theory for school managers and staff.

Consultation Workshop with Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs)

Of course, theoretical training is not enough. After learning the theory, staff then join consultation workshops that establish linkages between the school and their local DPO. DPOs are self-help civil society organizations formed by PWD for the benefit of PWD. Consultation workshops with DPO representatives provide opportunities to discuss difficulties PWD may face in attending training at the school and how the school can accommodate the needs of PWD. Involving DPOs from an early stage of the training program helps pave the way for future collaborations. For example, DPOs can later help the school with recruitment, fundraising and advocacy.

Exchange Visits

Visiting other centers that train SWDs can be inspirational. Not only does school staff get a chance to witness how other institutions accommodate and support SWDs in their learning and gain practical insight from their colleagues, exchange visits also foster constructive and supportive relationships among training centers serving PWD. These relationships can be a source of mutual technical support in the long-run. In addition to exchange visits at project start-up, ITTP supports annual exchange visits and workshops. These events strengthen the schools' support network and create opportunities for them to continue sharing.

Infrastructure Renovation

Renovations may be necessary to ensure that (1) classrooms and restrooms are accessible and (2) there is enough dormitory space. Few buildings in Vietnam are accessible for SWDs. Indeed, even the ground floor is usually several steps above ground. DPO representatives and accessibility experts should be consulted to ensure renovation meets the need of PWD. To the extent it is possible, schools are encouraged to share the costs of renovation and consider improving the accessibility of all school facilities to ensure SWDs can participate in other school activities.

C. Target Training to Match the Skills Demanded by the Labor Market

ITTP is designed to improve the employment outcomes and earning potential of youth with disabilities. One of the main shortcomings of traditional training programs is that courses are not linked to the job market—this makes it difficult for graduates to find jobs after training. In addition, graduates of short vocational training programs face challenges competing against other job seekers who possess a 4-year degree. ITTP addresses these challenges with the following.

Link Schools to Employment Introduction Centers (EICs)

In Vietnam, each city has a government-run employment introduction center (EIC) that gathers information for recruiters and job seekers and hosts regular job fairs. CRS encourages schools to make use of IEC services. For example, trends in the local labor market can be teased out by going through past vacancy announcements. In addition to providing an insight on the job market, these centers can also refer PWD job seekers to appropriate training centers and refer graduates to companies that are hiring.

Link Schools to Employers

Once students have graduated they must compete with other non-disabled job seekers, many of whom have 4-year university degrees. ITTP addresses this by working closely with employers to ensure the training program focuses on the specific niche skills employers need. Understanding market trends helps schools focus on industries where demand is highest and where skilled human resources are in shortest supply. In the past, the lack of such cooperation between training programs and employers was a major reason for low employment rates after graduation.

To establish linkages between schools and potential employers, ITTP creates:

1. **Employer workshops**

These introduce ITTP as a program that invites private sector contribution. Interested employers can have a big influence on what students learn and may even co-design training courses. The result is win-win for everyone:

- Students are trained in skills with high market demand,
- Students have a higher probability of securing a job after graduation and
- Employers save on the cost of training new employees.

2. Business Advisory Councils (BACs)

Employers are more likely to make additional contributions (e.g. internships, scholarships) when they feel ownership over the training program. Business Advisory Councils (BACs) cement and formalize the relationship between schools and the most committed employers. BACs meet quarterly or bi-annually to advise school management on curriculum design, job placement and fundraising for scholarships. Ideally, these BACs will continue to advise and support schools after the project ends.

D. Engage SWDs with Appropriate Training Methods

The general education system in Vietnam is not yet well-equipped to support SWDs. Current challenges include (1) inaccessible school facilities, (2) lack of trained teachers and (3) lack of accessible learning materials. For example, there are very few Braille learning materials outside of special schools. Computers with assistive technologies such as text-to-speech software can greatly increase SWD access to learning materials. Unfortunately, SWDs often enter training with very little IT knowledge and experience. As such, CRS and participating schools have used the following strategies to ensure effective learning in a short amount of time.

Start with the Very Basics

Each training course dedicates about 2 months to basic computer literacy. This establishes a uniform baseline in IT knowledge among students before moving on to more advanced topics.

Although he is not a dentist, Nguyen Duy Hoc says his role overseeing the information technology program at Xuan Huong Dental Clinic in Buon Me Thuot City is a job he can sink his teeth into. That's because despite being a small, young man with two very small hands, he learned advanced software engineering skills from the USAID-funded Information Technology Training Program.

Like 21 other disabled classmates, Hoc found a job within one month after his ITTP graduation. His duties at the dental clinic include maintaining the company's computer system, designing advertisement banners and posters for online and outdoor displays, providing online and telephone customer consultation services and developing the clinic website.

"At first I was quite worried to have a person with disabilities like Hoc in the company," admits Xuan Huong, the dental clinic's director. "But just after two weeks, Hoc changed my mind. . . . Thanks to his effort, our IT component was established well and is run only by him. Having a dependable IT program in the company



Nguyen Duy Hoc stands on the left with other co-workers at the Xuan Huong Dental Clinic. *Photo by Sean Sprague for CRS*

helps us to reduce the workload and create a really professional working environment.”

In his spare time, Hoc motivates other young disabled persons to seek a brighter future. He helps to manage an online forum for persons with disabilities. He also shares his life story with parents of children with disabilities. His end-goal is to open a computer skills training course for persons with disabilities in his hometown, Buon Me Thuot City.

Emphasize Hands-On Learning over Theory

To address students’ lack of prior IT experience, ITTP spends no more than 30 percent of training time in lectures. The remaining 70 percent or more is allocated to practical exercises with the supportive supervision of teachers.

Group Work

Requiring students to work on assignments in groups creates opportunities for them to learn from one another. It also improves their communication and teamwork skills—abilities that are essential for success in the modern workplace. Group work is especially important for students with hearing impairments. Schools have few sign language interpreters; when working in groups, students with hearing impairments can use sign language to communicate with each other.

Using Online Platforms to Share Teaching and Learning Materials

Students have continuous online access to learning materials, including lecture notes, references and assignments. This frees them up from note taking, giving them more time to absorb the trainings and practice what they are learning. They may also catch up, review or study at any time. Students are encouraged to read ahead so that lecture time can be used to ask questions and get clarifications. Moreover, this modality gets students used to searching online for answers rather than waiting for class, thereby increasing both their responsibility for their own learning and their facility with online applications.

Teaching Students How to Find Resources

It is impossible for a short training course to train students in everything they will need to know in their future jobs. We also cannot predict what new technologies will appear in the future. Yet there are a number of tutorials and references available online to support ongoing professional development in just about any topic. Knowing how to tap into these resources is an important skill for students. Teachers are encouraged to provide links to external resources to ensure that students develop the habit of using these resources outside the classroom.

Intensive Schedule

The training schedule is designed to resemble a typical company workday. Classes begin at 8 a.m. and wrap up at 5 p.m. On Saturdays students participate in soft skills trainings, social activities and English classes. This is much more intensive than the typical college student's schedule in Vietnam, allowing more materials to be covered in a short amount of time and helping students prepare for the busy schedule of their future workplace.

E. Support SWDs outside the Classroom

In addition to technical training, the program provides social support and soft skills training to help students adjust to greater independence. More than 80 percent of ITTP participants are from rural areas and live in school dormitories while attending the training. For many of these students, this is the first time they have ever lived away from their families. Even simple tasks such as personal hygiene can be difficult for some SWDs. The training schedule is intensive, and students experience quite a bit of stress, especially in the first weeks. The following activities have been effective in helping students become more independent and self-confident when facing daily challenges.

Social Workers

Each school has a dedicated social worker who, following ITTP-supported training, assists students outside the classroom. S/he regularly talks to each student and counsels her/him on good coping strategies.

Peer Support and Social Activities

Students come into the training program with different levels of life skills. Students who live and train together also share life lessons with each other and encourage each other to stay positive in the face of difficulties. Each class has a social committee in charge of organizing social activities to improve students' quality of life and help them develop social and communication skills. Many social activities are jointly organized with non-disabled students. These activities benefit students with and without disabilities.

Mentoring by Alumni and Successful PWD

Students who have successfully completed the training and found jobs are great resources for current students. Schools regularly invite alumni back to lead discussions and participate in events. On special occasions such as International Disability Day, schools invite well-known and successful PWD to share their life stories and encourage students to be persistent in pursuing their dreams.

F. Prepare and Place SWDs in Jobs

A training program is only as successful as its ability to place graduates in jobs. Prior to ITTP, SWDs often lived sheltered or segregated lives with limited opportunities for social interaction outside of their immediate family. For this reason, CRS and schools organize activities to enhance students' social skills and create opportunities for them to find and succeed in jobs.

Soft Skills Training

Soft skills such as teamwork and communication are important for success within the workplace. This is an area in which traditional training programs often fall short. In the ITTP model, soft skills are integrated into daily training activities. Schools also work with DPOs to organize special training sessions on weekends for specific soft skills such as goal setting and time management.

Coaching in CV Preparation and Mock Interviews

In order to introduce themselves to employers, students must learn how to write concise and targeted CVs and present themselves appropriately in interviews. Schools work with DPOs to organize workshops where students can learn CV writing and interview skills from other PWD. BAC members also make their human resources staff available to provide interview tips and lead mock interview sessions.

Organizing Workplace Exposure Tours

Many SWDs worry about stigma and are concerned that employers may not be willing to hire them. In order to motivate SWDs and help them overcome their fears, schools and BAC members jointly organize tours to expose students to the work environment. During these tours, students are given the chance to dialogue with the management of the host companies and see for themselves the structure and operations of the organization.



Students visit a modern work environment during an exposure trip. *Photo by Dang Minh Ha for CRS*

Awareness Raising for Employers

Despite laws that incentivize employers to hire PWD, many are reluctant to do so. Reasons for this include: (1) employers are not sure how to accommodate and support employees with disabilities, (2) employers are unsure about the productivity of PWD and (3) employers are unsure how their staff and customers will react to PWD. In the ITTP model, CRS, schools and BAC members organize workshops for human resource managers. These workshops:

- Facilitate open discussions on private sector concerns,
- Sensitize managers to the benefits of hiring PWD and
- Educate managers on how to accommodate staff with diverse disabilities.

Earning while Learning

Most students are from provinces a long way away from both the training centers and most IT employment opportunities. If students are not hired soon after graduation, they may be compelled to return to their home town where opportunities for using their new skills may be scarce.

In the ITTP model, schools accommodated graduates in their dormitories following graduation. While students looked for a permanent job, the school and BAC members sourced them contract work to get additional hands-on experience and earn money to cover basic living expenses.

Internships

Because few companies are willing to hire new graduates as regular full-time staff, ITTP works with them to develop internship programs. During the internship, businesses test graduates' on-the-job performance without having to engage in a long-term commitment. Students also benefit by getting additional hands-on experience. *In ITTP, more than 90 percent of students who got an internship later got a full-time job with the same company.*



A student receives individual attention from an instructor. *Photo by Sean Sprague for CRS*

Entrepreneurship Support

While the overall design of the training program is focused on helping students find jobs with established companies, some students choose to start their own businesses. Schools do not provide entrepreneurship-related training but they do:

- Link students to entrepreneurship training providers and
- Work with DPOs to help graduates access government-backed poverty alleviation loans ear-marked for PWD.

G. Sustain and Expand Program Impact

ITTP has changed the lives of more than 500 disabled youth since 2007. During the current phase, one of ITTP's top priorities is to ensure the sustainability of the training program and spread sound practices from ITTP schools to other institutions interested in training PWD. ITTP's strategies for achieving this are as follows.

Student and Family Contribution

At enrollment, each participant with a government-issued poverty certificate received a full scholarship to cover the costs of her/his training. Schools also supported students to access student loans. However, as the program progressed families that could afford to contribute something were encouraged to do so. The ITTP experience is that these contributions not only help to support program sustainability, but also demonstrate the value of the training to the students and their families. Notably, as contributions increased, the drop-out rate decreased.

Move toward Inclusion

Most participants are enrolled in specially designed training classes that only SWDs may attend. While this approach allows for more tailored training, it is difficult to sustain without donor support. Having some students attend classes together with non-disabled students could reduce costs and allow schools to continue admitting SWDs after the end of the project.

Government Funding

While there is— theoretically — government funding available for PWD vocational training, accessing those resources has proven challenging. CRS and schools will continue exploring different avenues to access government funding.

Fundraising

Even with an inclusive approach there are costs associated with students' living expenses. If no alternative donors are found, poor students and students from distant provinces may not be able to benefit from the training program. Thus, finding other donors to replace CRS and USAID is critical to ensuring the most marginalized SWDs will be able to participate.

Outreach Training

Vietnam has PWD rehabilitation centers that already receive government funding to provide basic training. For example, rehabilitation centers for the blind provide training in Braille and massage; rehabilitation centers for people with mobility disabilities have handicraft training. Collaborating

with these centers (e.g., providing IT training courses within the centers themselves) could be one strategy to sustain the ITTP program.

Replication of Good Practices

The government of Vietnam manages a network of general vocational training centers and special vocational training centers for PWD. Currently very few PWD are admitted to the general vocational training centers and special centers only provide training in manual labor. Moreover, vocational training centers have a poor track record in job placement. *The goal of this project is to promote full social inclusion of PWD, including in schools and workplaces.* Two or three schools providing high quality vocational training to a few hundred SWDs per year is not sufficient. While this is a good beginning, it is too early to be satisfied yet. ITTP is working to see these project lessons adopted by other training centers so that thousands of SWDs may participate.

Promote IT as a Way to Help SWDs Overcome Barriers to Education

ITTP has demonstrated that IT can help SWD overcome physical and sensory barriers to learning. For example, blind students can use text-to-speech technology and the internet to access digital learning materials. IT can also be used to remove barriers for SWDs in the general education system. CRS is working with Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training to pilot the use of IT in schools to support SWD education.



Intel has participated in hosting exposure trips and teaching students interview skills. *Photo by CRS staff*

Conclusion

People with disabilities are one of the most disadvantaged groups when it comes to accessing education and employment opportunities. When empowered with IT skills and access to the internet, however, PWD can overcome many of the physical barriers they face in their daily lives and be productive members of society. Unlike traditional jobs assigned to people with disabilities in Vietnam (e.g., massage, handicrafts and manual labor), IT jobs are more prestigious and higher paying. ITTP and partners are hopeful that disability-related stigma will disappear and more and more opportunities for PWD social inclusion and economic empowerment will emerge when the public sees that people with disabilities are capable of working in IT jobs.



The use of text-to-speech technology and the internet to access digital learning materials has been critical in removing barriers for the visually impaired to participate in the program. *Photo by Dang Minh Ha for CRS*



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