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## **Access to Services for Airline Wheelchair Passengers : A Case Study of Thai Air Asia**

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### **Abstract (Number: O142)**

The objective of this research was to investigate the channels of service accessed by wheelchair passengers, flight and service information, service experiences, passengers' satisfaction level as well as suggestions received from wheelchair passengers of Thai Air Asia. A qualitative study was employed and the data collection was done by documentary analysis including a study of other related researches about quality of life, human rights, and concepts of providing services to the disabled passengers. The data were also collected and analyzed through a structured interview. The participants of this research were divided into 3 groups: airline staff, wheelchair passengers, and the disabled. The findings indicated that the airline did not provide enough information regarding service and contact channels for passengers. First-time disabled passengers did not have enough understanding of the service provided. Due to the restrictions at some airports, the limitation of facilities and the lack of staff, problems occurred and passengers felt dissatisfied, anxious and discriminated.

The recommendations to this research were that the airlines and personnel involved should have understanding more on the travel restrictions and give more concern with planning for the increase of disabled passengers. Friendly design should be utilized so that the passengers do not require much assistance while the airline can also reduce the cost of facilities and staff to assist the disabled. Moreover, more knowledge in assisting the disabled passengers should be provided to the staff. At the same time, the airlines should add more publicity regarding basic travel knowledge for the passengers to prepare for their journey.

*Keywords:* Universal Design/ Friendly design, Access to service, Wheelchair, The disabled, Thai Air Asia

## **1. Introduction**

At the present, traveling by plane is considered a fast and time-saving journey. Low – cost airlines become more popular for most passengers especially for domestic travel whose passengers can be classified in many categories. For example, passengers with disabilities are one of them who require special arrangement during their travel. They require extra service from the airlines such as wheelchair arrangement. This research paper aimed to study the service provided and how to facilitate the necessary information to those disabled passengers who wish to travel with low – cost airlines. This is to determine how well they can access to this special service.

The researcher studied this service offered by Thai – Air Asia, one of the most famous low – cost airlines, whose network covering many regions in Thailand. It is obvious that the service provided by Thai Air Asia meets universal requirement with the approval of continuously increasing high record number of passengers. In addition, Thai Air Asia is the first low – cost airline of which policy cooperates with social responsibility and try to set standard to provide special proper arrangement for those passengers who may need special assistance. Thai – Air Asia also bands together with both Friendly Design Foundation and United Nation Development to launch the Air Asia Friendly Design Project. The objective of this project aims to improve facilities and set standard for all their staff members to be aware of the right of all passengers especially for those who may need special assistance such as passengers with disabilities, elderly passengers, handicapped passengers, minors and pregnant passengers to obtain the same quality of service when they travel. This can be proven when Thai – Air Asia announced to be the organization of the year that support friendly design project and also received the friendly design certificate on 1/12/2017. In the regard of this concern, Thai government also gives high attention to this situation since the number of passengers with disabilities travelling by air increase more and more and they may encounter such problems. In order to respond to this situation, The Ministry of Transport has announced the issue regarding the passenger’s bill of rights by using Thai airlines on domestic routes in 2010” which has an ambition to protect their right to deserve special attention from the airline they decide to travel. The issue of this concerns deals with cases such as the refusal of travelling with an airline due

to either cancelling or delaying the flight. As there are always many reports indicating the dispute between the passengers and airlines because they refuse to accept the passengers who request for a wheelchair during their travel. This problem is occurred because the airline is not well equipped or unable to facilitate them. Moreover, their personnel staffs do not fully understand the airline safety standards and also safety measurement in an aerodrome. All of these reasons bring the interest to the researcher to further study of how Thai Air Asia handle this situation.

Objectives of this research, the researcher studied the access channels, the information, the satisfactory level and the variety of service provided for disabled passengers using wheelchair service of Thai Air Asia. This paper presents an understanding of the air travel experiences of people with disabilities in Thailand using wheelchair service of Thai Air Asia.

Participants are passengers, the representative from many associations related to disabled passengers, disabled specialists and the representative from Thai Air Asia who participate in this program for 3 months from August 2018 to October 2018.

### **1.2. The significance of the research**

The research aims to get the information of how to access wheelchair request service of the airline that could lead to constructive suggestion.

- To obtain the information received from disabled passengers who used this service from the airline and gather the necessary comments to improve the service in the future.
- To know the satisfactory level from the disabled passengers who used this service from the airline that could provide an opportunity to improve service.
- To understand the service procedure offered to disabled passengers who use this service and make awareness of the existing service provided for disabled passengers

### **1.3. Definitions**

**The accessibility of the service** means the communicative channel between passengers and operating airline which includes the basic information accessible to all passengers or public sector.

**Wheelchair Service Passengers** mean the special service requested from the operating airline by the passengers. This service is to offer comfort for passengers when they are in the airport vicinity and in the aircraft. It is to ensure the safety during their

journey. Wheelchair may normally be provided for the passengers having difficulties in getting to/from the aircraft example: elderly passengers, disabled passengers (permanent or temporary disability) and sitting sick passengers. IATA (International Air Transport Association)

The wheelchair – requested service can be categorized by its type below;

1. WCHR (Wheelchair Ramp) Passenger can ascend/descend aircraft steps and make own way to/from cabin seat but requires wheelchair for distance to/from the aircraft.



Figure 1 Wheelchair Ramp, Shutterstock, 2018

2. WCHS (Wheelchair Steps) Passenger cannot ascend/descend steps but is able to make own way to/from cabin seat, requires wheelchair for distance to/from aircraft, must be carried up/down steps.



Figure 2 Wheelchair Steps, Colourbox, 2018

3. WCHC (Wheelchair Comp) Passengers are completely immobile, requires wheelchair to/from aircraft and must be carried up/down steps and to/from cabin seat.



Figure 3 Wheelchair Comp, Whizz-kidz, 2018

4. Wheelchair On-Board (WCOB) is intended for carrying passenger who requires the use of wheelchair to/from cabin seat or during toilet visit while on board.

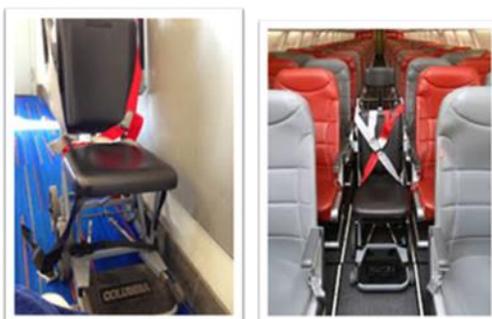


Figure 4 Wheelchair On-Board, Whizz-kidz, 2018

**Ambulift or Hi lift** is a car of the airline used to elevate the wheelchair and passenger together to the aircraft door when the aircraft is parked outside of the passenger terminal building. It is used to transfer passengers.



Figure 5 Ambu-lift or Hi lift ,Peter Tan, 2017

**Disabled Passengers, PRM** (A person with reduced mobility): Any persons whose mobility is reduced due to physical disability (locomotory or sensory) intellectual impairment, age, illness or any other cause of disability.

*MAKING DESIGN ACCESSIBLE FOR EVERYONE IN SOCIETY*



Figure 6 Disabled Passengers, University of Texas at Austin, 2016

**Universal Design, Friendly Design** is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used all people regardless of their, size, age, disability or ability.



Figure 7 Universal Design, Friendly Design, University Design Council, 2016

## 2. Concepts, Theories and Related Researches

According to Thai AirAsia case study, the researcher used theories, concepts and related researches to determine the potential problems in accessing services of passengers using wheelchair services and giving an advice to promote ideas about human rights as well as the quality of life. Therefore, the criteria to find the possible solution for this research is based on approaches related with elderly service arrangement, special service provided, relevant problems and suggestion gathering from relevant researches.

- Human rights are rights to all human beings, regardless of sex, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Basic Principles of Human Rights

1. Natural Rights and Human Dignity
2. Universality & Inalienability
3. Indivisibility
4. Equality and Non-Discrimination

- The concept of providing facilities to serve only to passengers with disabilities and elderly. The Government Disability Passenger Service Policy indicates the problem of passengers with disabilities and elderly passengers who travel by plane is because of their physical problems. The government seeks to support and encourage people with disabilities to have equality when it comes to the right of their general public to access state services, which are the rights defined in The Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, Year 2007. Moreover, the government issued the Act on Promotion and Development of the Quality of Life of the Disabled 2007 to determine the standard or criteria of equipment used to facilitate those passengers in the building, other facilities such as accessibility of any vehicles, transportation services or other public services for people with disabilities. They must be able to enjoy these benefits. In this reason, all service providers have to comply with this Ministerial Regulation and support "Arayasaphat" (Universal Design) which is the design for all people or design what is accessible for all groups in the society. It is the design concerning about the environment, places and things for the elderly workers with disabilities and disadvantaged people who have limit access to those facilities. The principles of Universal design include

1. Fairness, Equitable Use

2. Flexibility in Use
3. Simple and Intuitive
4. Perceptible Information
5. Safety, Tolerance for Error
6. Energy Conservation, Low Physical Effort
7. Space, Size and Space for Approach and Use

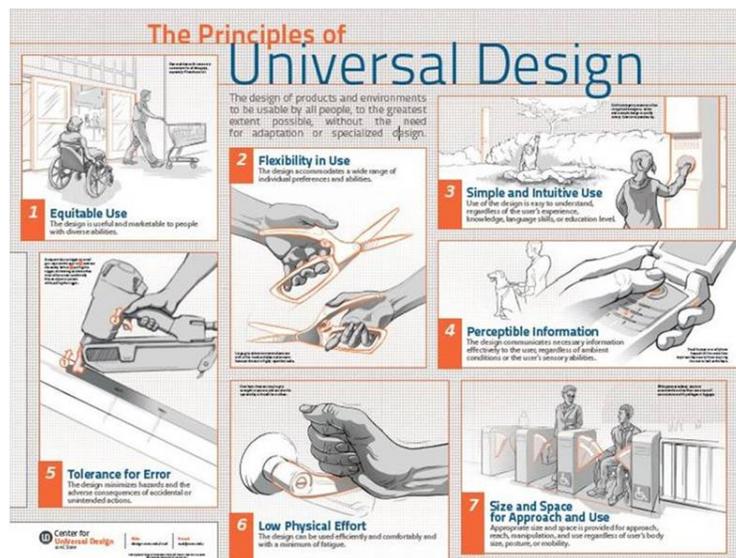


Figure 8 The principles of Universal design, NC State University Center, 2018

- **FLYING WITH IMPAIRMENTS: IMPROVING AIRLINE PRACTICES BY UNDERSTANDING: THE EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES** by Dr. Simon Darcy (2016) This research presents an understanding of the air travel experiences of passengers with disabilities for improving safety and health considerations of low-cost airlines in Australia. The research design used phenomenological qualitative to understand the experiences of passengers with disabilities in their own words. The resultant experience for many was one of heightened anxiety, helplessness and, in too many cases, humiliation.

- **TAKING OVER THE WORLD IN A WHEELCHAIR: The Difficulties and Challenges when Travelling by Air Transportation** by Saaka Saari (2015) This research was to get knowledge about the challenges and difficulties passengers in a wheelchair may

face while they are travelling by air transportation. The matter was viewed from the point of view of equality as a wheelchair passenger actually has the same possibilities for air transportation as the others passengers. The problem is the use of lavatory, as it very often is impossible during a flight. A majority of the disabled-passengers felt they do not have equal rights and possibilities for air travel if compared to able-bodied passengers (ABP).

### **3. Research Methods**

This research is a Qualitative Research. The data collection methods mainly derived from documents, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Participants in this research is a group of people who have a direct experience with the issue. It is considered a feature-based data and facts that appear or from the actual environment. Therefore, the method to collect data is from observation, interview, recording, descriptive analysis and finally gather all data to conclude the result of how to provide a constructive suggestion to this special service by narrating from the important information from the key informants. Participants in this research are selected by criterion – based selection which are the persons who are disabled with various characteristics and have an experience in using Thai AirAsia's wheelchair service and specialists on wheelchair accessibility. This research mainly concerns about the access to special services and the satisfaction of arranging travel facilities for passengers with disabilities using Thai AirAsia's wheelchair and can be divided the interview questions as follows:

1. Interview passengers using Thai AirAsia's wheelchair service. Every key informant will be asked about access to services and travel experiences.
2. Interview with experts about disability whom will be asked about access to services and travel experiences and suggestions that require airlines to improve to suit passengers using wheel-chairs.
3. Interview with Thai AirAsia airline agents whom will be asked about airline policy in providing dis-abled passengers in various forms of services, including problems and guidelines for airline solutions.

Before the interview, researcher will inform key informants that all the information in the interview will be recorded and requesting permission to use the names and general

information of key informants to use as a reference in this research document. This research used an open-ended question to allow key informants to share experiences about accessing information for special service requests and travel experience using wheelchairs from airlines including inquiring about the satisfaction of using special services including suggestions of key informants about the service of Thai AirAsia.

Kitzinger (2008) mentioned about the selection of Focus Group people with similarities that it is easy to gather experiences together, such as similarities in the profession, belonging to the same group or association. The researcher therefore divided the group discussion by interviewing the airline group. Thai AirAsia airline's employees divided into

- Phuket station manager, 1 person
- Duty Executive FD HKT, 2 persons
- Guest Service Supervisor, 3 persons

Questions for interviewing Thai AirAsia airline representatives is a question about the policy of the service line for disabled passengers, providing information to passengers before traveling. The questions concern about the equipment that the airline offers to the disabled including the airline's instructions for disabled passengers using the airline's wheelchair service, which can be concluded that the airline has a clear policy on providing assistance to passengers with disabilities traveling with airlines and there are many ways to access these services. Passengers can also request services in advance according to the way the airline determines or requests services at the airport. However, each airline's Wheelchair Battery has limitations in terms of size, so there is a requirement for the number of passengers using wheelchairs and equipment based on the safety rules of the aviation rules regarding Dangerous Goods Regulations (DGR). According to IATA, 2018, passengers traveling with Lithium Batteries are given the right to inform an airline in advance about the need of using equipment or ambulift in bringing passengers down from the plane or inquiring about the availability. The officer will inform passengers in advance about the solution that there will be staff who have been trained to transfer passenger, help with their bags and help them in case the wheelchairs is downstairs.



Figure 9 <https://support.airasia.com/s/article/How-will-my-wheelchair-mobility-device-be-transported?language=th>

Gordon and Langmaid (2000) explained that the advantages of in-depth interviews are able to collect information both broadly and deeply. The questions that can be changed and be flexible if they want passenger to understand better or be able to create positive logical interaction with passengers.

#### **4. Results of the study**

Researcher has divided key informants for in-depth interviews into 2 groups:

1) Expert on wheelchair use, Khun Kritsanalai, the president of the Aryasathat Foundation for All people, Thai news presenters for Channel 3 and Nation TV which is disabled by a car accident and has been using wheelchair since 1997. From his experience of traveling with both domestic and international, Khun Kritsana has an opinion on accessing services and information that there should be media suggesting special airline service requests and should train employees to be standardized by determining basic questions that are primarily used in querying symptoms or assisting passengers. Their employees should have the same criteria and try to adopt Universal Design to use during their travel. For example, there could be facilities such as designing a ticket counter that reduces height, making a seamless link ramp and adjust the bathroom on the plane appropriately.



Figure 10: JAL Priority Guest Support, 2015. Level Luggage Check, 2018, Space Flex Lavatory A320, 2015

2) Three experienced passengers who use wheelchair service from Thai AirAsia which have different age were asked about the need to request a wheelchair service and experience traveling with a wheelchair with Thai AirAsia. They provided suggestion to airlines to improve their service to suit passengers. They express their opinion that they feel that wheelchair passengers felt that they are not treated equally with other passengers. It is shameful that they could not help themselves during the journey and there is insufficiency of equipment. Airlines should have a public relations statement explaining useful information and procedures for requesting passenger services through various media.

## 5. Conclusion

Research "Access to services of passengers using wheelchair services: case study of Thai AirAsia Airlines" The researcher aims to study the channels of access to services, service model, information needed to travel and satisfaction of passengers with disabilities using Thai AirAsia's wheel-chair service. From the point of view of each party, the researcher introduced concepts and theories about quality of life by not being discriminated against and civilized architecture which is the concept of equipment design, environment, facilities to allow passengers traveling by wheelchair to receive qual services equal same as normal passengers (an able-bodied passenger)

From the point of view of airlines and related staff, Thai AirAsia is an airline that sees and gives priority to all types of passengers, including regular passengers and passengers who need help, by adhering to the safety principles that are the heart of aviation, which passengers can request for a wheelchair service from the beginning of the

ticket reservation from the website and trained related staff about the care and transport of passengers who need help and suggestions for passengers, should be prepared for basic self-help during travel and the use of equipment needed. Passengers found that there is a problem with access to the wheelchair service because the airline lacks of public relations information, service channels and procedures in the process of travel and at destination, the availability of equipment and personnel.

Recommendations to airlines, airlines should be aware that the number of passengers using wheelchairs that it will increase in the future therefore, they should add more travel facilities and equipment to meet all passengers' requirement. They should have public relations for the general public to know how to obtain basic information when traveling. Passengers using wheelchairs also want to receive equal services to others, and are not being discriminated or having discrimination and should have a right to ask for a better quality of life. These can be done by adapting the ideal of using the civilized architecture and providing necessary equipment and promoting the information to the public. From the conclusion, the researcher has suggested as follows:

- For airlines, information relating to the rights, practices and details for passengers with disabilities must be informed. The researcher proposed that airlines should increase public relations to passengers and the general public through various media so that passengers receive complete information.
- Civilized architecture to be considered to apply to use the travelling environment by making use of various public devices so everyone can access and it also promotes the quality of people with disabilities to live freely and equally with others.
- Should increase welfare and facilities to be ready for the elderly society, such as increasing areas or districts only for the elderly and the disabled. Training should be provided for the general public to prepare for an increased age, seeking knowledge about self-care and others by disseminating knowledge and welfare through public media or communities. From the results of the study, it was found that passengers were concerned about traveling due to physical limitations. In order to reduce this anxiety, the airline should find a management approach based on understanding and treating passengers with disabilities with equality. Give independence and respect for dignity. The guidelines are not contrary to the safety rules which are universal rules. As mentioned in the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) that airlines must participate in these principles to prevent human rights violations International (United Nations, 2006)

For further research. The researcher proposed that further studies on the accessibility of wheelchair access services for other types of mass transit services are provided whether public transport with regular routes such as buses, trains or non-transportation such as taxis, vans, buses that provide services along various routes, to provide guidance on how to facilitate the disabled, offer assistive devices for people with disabilities to live easily, safe and independent and proposed to study more about the civilized architecture that can facilitate the disability. How can it be applied to airlines and airports in order to be consistent with human rights rather than ignoring them.

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