

By Invitation

# Society is richer for integrating the talents of people with special needs

Like an orchestra, it takes everyone to make it work



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In early July, I attended the 2018 Purple Symphony Concert. The symphony is an inclusive orchestra comprising musicians with and without special needs, whose members play a range of instruments. There was also dancing. I was impressed by the quality of the performances, even more so by the apparent ease with which the musicians interacted and supported one another.

The performance was moving. It triggered my thoughts on how we can offer young people with special needs the best education, to help them live to their full capabilities. For them and for Singapore, this is an important challenge.

Originating from Scandinavia in the 1960s, the principle of normalisation and integration seeks to make available to all with special needs the conditions of everyday living that are as close as possible to the regular circumstances of our society. I witnessed its success with my sister's son, who was born with Down syndrome. By creating an environment where he was treated like everybody else, he became an independent man, contributing to society at the level of his abilities.

At the university level, I strongly support normalisation and integration.

**SUCCESS STORIES**

There are several success stories. Swimmer Yip Pin Xiu clinched two gold medals at the 2016 Paralympics in Brazil. Her performance undoubtedly results from talent and hard work, achieved while completing her bachelor's degree in social sciences at Singapore Management University (SMU). Beyond these well-published cases, there are many unsung heroes. Let me describe three.

Ephraim Lin, who graduated from SMU's School of Social Sciences in 2011, is a wheelchair user. His good performance during his student internship earned him a place as an employee with a global financial institution. Ephraim recently embraced fatherhood

with the birth of a baby girl. According to Ephraim, his first experience upon entering university was uncertain. His determination to challenge himself and maximise the opportunities SMU accorded to undergraduates pushed him to carry on. Besides the compulsory freshmen team-building camp, Ephraim decided to join two other camps in an effort to engage with others. He considers it a personal achievement to have stepped out of his comfort zone.

Ephraim led an active student life at SMU. He served on the executive committee of the School of Social Sciences Student Society, where he organised a gamut of activities. As part of the trilympics executive committee, he raised funds and awareness for disability sports. He easily exceeded the 80-hour community service graduation requirement.

He also found time to be a teaching assistant to three professors, and went on a business study mission to the Middle East.

During the trip, his classmates were unfailingly helpful, aiding him in getting on and off the bus.

Ong Hui Xin, a fourth-year undergraduate majoring in sociology and psychology, has been visually impaired since she was young. She leads an active student life, having participated in the freshmen orientation and School of Social Sciences camps, and in SMU's peer helpers programme.

Hui Xin's experience as a peer helper strengthened her interest in professional counselling work, shaping her career aspirations of pursuing a master's degree in counselling or psychology. She has also gained work experience through two internship placements at AIG Asia Pacific Insurance and Accenture, serving in the digital and technology-related research teams respectively.

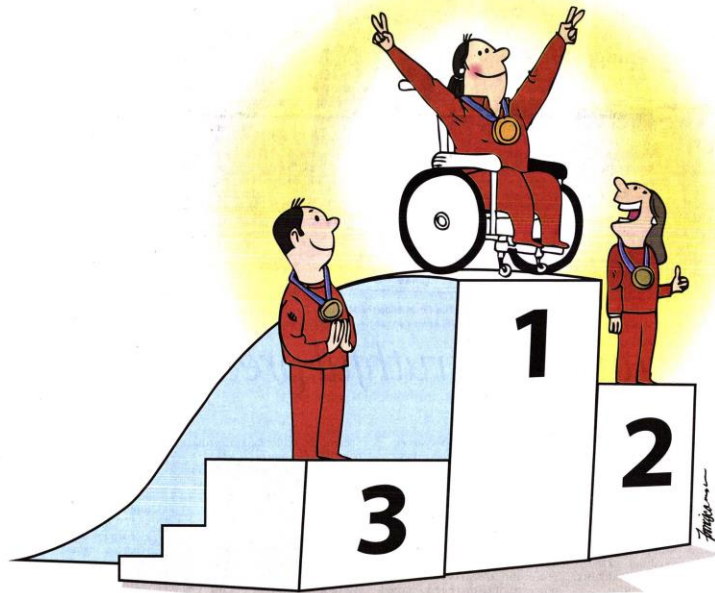
For Hui Xin, it is even more challenging to navigate the social cues of professional work settings. SMU's "finishing touch" programme equipped her with invaluable knowledge of the

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etiquette required, from job interviews to networking events.

Hui Xin chose SMU because of its seminar-style pedagogy. She prefers small classrooms over lecture halls, giving her more opportunities to interact with others. SMU student assistants help her in class by providing video descriptions, interpreting professors' drawings and explaining humorous anecdotes. In one touching instance, she had raised her hand to participate in the class discussion while the professor was not facing her. All her classmates started waving for the professor's attention, on her behalf.

Being without sight is challenging, and Hui Xin is still learning to step out of her comfort zone. For her, a good way to get accustomed to university life is to participate actively in class and out-of-classroom activities. To her, studying is fun, broadening her knowledge of the world and, perhaps most importantly, training her to stand up and better present her thoughts and ideas.



Mohamed Najulah, a second-year student with the School of Information Systems, uses a wheelchair. SMU was Najulah's first choice, partly because it offered the convenience of a central city location. He has since found students and staff friendly and open to conversation. Najulah is independent, enjoys going out with his friends and served as a helper at Freshman orientation camp. His advice for incoming first-year students: invest energy in getting to know the campus environment and the people who will be with you for at least four years.

There are many others with special needs who have succeeded brilliantly through sheer effort and with the help of others. All of them have become valuable contributors to Singapore society.

## LESSONS AND PAYOFFS

In the process of promoting normalisation and integration at SMU, I have learnt a few things.

First, it is hard. It requires determination and courage from people with special needs to integrate into the everyday living conditions on campus. It also requires strong commitment by their peers, who serve as helpers, and fellow students. But such efforts result in a huge payoff.

For society, it helps to have its citizens with special needs perform at their highest level of capabilities. For students, they learn to overcome inhibitions towards those who are different and to create an inclusive climate on campus.

Second, we learnt much as an institution committed to providing a holistic education experience to all. We rediscovered how to make the campus more accessible for students using wheelchairs and how to improve the accessibility to our learning management system.

Our faculty considered the difficulties encountered by people with visual or hearing impairment and made adjustments to team-based learning methods, orientation, sports, internships and community service, without ever lowering rigorous academic standards. These lessons learnt were summarised in a Guide to Disability Services and Inclusive Education that is available to all.

Third, empowerment. There may be a tendency to become paternalistic and to over-accommodate. We should not become a nanny university. We look to students with special needs to also exercise self-determination, self-advocacy and to independently communicate their needs. All of our students are living up to those expectations.

They take responsibility in managing their progress and experiences on campus, regardless of their special needs.

We don't have all the answers. We are still learning. But I am convinced that if we continue with normalisation and integration, Singapore as a society will gain formidable and highly effective contributors. As with the Purple Symphony, if we all play our part, paying attention to all others, we will have a beautiful performance.

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