

SMU to work with Society for the Physically Disabled to help students with disabilities

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Students with disabilities and special needs can soon look forward to having greater support and interaction at the Singapore Management University. -- PHOTO: SMU VIA FACEBOOK
By Amelia Teng

Students with disabilities and special needs can soon look forward to having greater support and interaction at the Singapore Management University.

The university has started a new effort to build a more inclusive culture and reach out to students with disabilities - the first such endeavour among educational institutions in Singapore.

Since the initiative started last year, SMU has organised workshops and conferences to discuss inclusivity, discrimination and biases.

A new undergraduate course on diversity, global citizenship and cultural intelligence is in the works, and several initiatives to support disabled students are being planned.

SMU also organised its first conference with the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) on Friday, where several speakers from disabled associations and undergraduates shared their views on topics in diversity and inclusivity.

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The university took a step further by signing a memorandum of understanding with SPD, to work with the voluntary welfare organisation on a number of fronts.

These include building awareness and sensitivities among students and faculty, and further supporting the disabled with help through assistive technology, better accessibility on campus, as well as job matching.

SMU president Arnoud De Meyer said in his speech: "There is much to learn, and we are prepared to study, to consult with the experts, and to do our own homework."

"No deserving student, staff or faculty should be denied access or opportunities at SMU on the basis of their physical, social, economic, cultural attributes or other backgrounds," he said.

He added that being inclusive is a social responsibility the young must have, and SMU is joining many institutions and corporations around the world which have also put greater focus on helping the disabled in their midst.

SPD President Chia Yong Yong said: "For persons with disabilities, due to our constraints, education plays an even more critical role in expanding career options, and in giving us an opportunity to be economically productive, which is important to their sense of dignity."

"As a person with disability, I was blessed growing up... with the support of family, friends and teachers. That enabled me to complete my university education, without which, I would not have been able to be a lawyer today."

Ms Chia, a corporate lawyer at Yusarn Audrey, a law firm specialising in intellectual property, was diagnosed at 15 with a nerve and muscular disorder.

She added that her hope was to see more children with special needs being able to attend mainstream schools, so that there would be better integration.

Minister of State for Education, and Communications and Information, Sim Ann, who was guest of honour at the conference, commended SMU's efforts, and added that the Ministry of Education is also working on making the transition to higher education institutions for special needs students more seamless.

This has been done by expanding a pilot scheme in 2013 to transfer diagnosis and support information of special needs students from 64 secondary schools to the polytechnics and the Institute of Technical Education, and training staff there to offer practical help to students.