



Dr Earl Avery from Bentley University, who is a champion for diversity and inclusion initiatives, speaking at yesterday's conference. Also on stage is a sign language interpreter from the Singapore Association for the Deaf. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

SMU to make life easier for disabled students

Uni to get help from Society for the Physically Disabled

By AMELIA TENG

FOR the first time, a local university has linked up with the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) to make life easier for its disabled students.

As part of a memorandum of understanding signed yesterday, the SPD will help the Singapore Management University (SMU) support students

with assistive technology, such as voice recognition software, and match them with potential jobs after graduation.

Other plans include reviewing the way students with disabilities are tested in class, and how they take part in co-curricular activities and overseas programmes.

"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," said SMU president Arnoud De Meyer yesterday at a conference organised by the university and SPD.

Last January, SMU became the first tertiary institution here to form a committee to study ways to support students with disabilities.

Mr De Meyer revealed how several initiatives are now in the works, including a compulsory module on diversity for all SMU undergraduates. This will be rolled out in the next few years.

There will also be adjustments to the campus' hardware to make day-to-day school activities easier for students with different needs.

For instance, the height at which printers are sited will be lowered so that wheelchair users can reach them, while doors will be able to swing both

ways instead of having to be pulled.

AN OPPORTUNITY

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— SPD president Chia Yong Yong, a corporate lawyer who uses a wheelchair because of a nerve and muscular disorder

SMU has about 70 students — 1 per cent of its total — with disabilities, including dyslexia, hearing and visual impairments, and physical disabilities such as paralysis of their limbs.

Minister of State (Education, and Communications and Information) Sim Ann, who was

guest of honour at the conference, commended SMU's efforts, adding: "Some students do find the transition from schools to institutes of higher learning to be rather challenging."

SPD president Chia Yong Yong said at yesterday's event that it was important to open doors to higher education for the disabled.

"Due to the constraints, education plays an even more critical role in expanding career options, and in giving them an opportunity to be economically productive, which is important to their sense of dignity," said the corporate lawyer, who uses a wheelchair because of a nerve and muscular disorder.

"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."

SMU graduate Ephraim Lin, who uses a wheelchair, said the initiative gives disabled students an official channel through which they can seek help. In the past, students were not sure who they could turn to, he explained.

"Entering university was a real struggle," said the 25-year-old, who is paralysed from the waist down after suffering a stroke when he was nine years old.

"Sometimes you just need someone to hear you out and understand your limitations."

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