

# What disabled students need

THE Disabled People's Association lauds the Singapore Management University's initiative to support students with disabilities ("SMU to make life easier for disabled students"; last Saturday).

Diversity on our campuses should encompass disabled students.

We commend the faculty and staff at local institutes of higher learning who go the extra mile to support such students. Inclusion and acceptance by their peers play an important part too.

We have received anecdotal accounts from disabled students of their struggles with accessibility, communication and social support.

Their difficulties are not caused by their disabilities per se but in getting access to appropriate help, and are aggravated by the fragmented, ad hoc nature of existing support systems.

Sometimes, understanding and assistance were not forthcoming, and the students ended up having to figure out solutions on their own or footing the cost of the required services or facilities themselves.

In contrast, those who studied overseas have given feedback on how they benefited from the comprehensive range of free services provided by the institutions' dedicated disability departments.

For example, note-takers or sign language interpreters are provided for deaf undergraduates in Australia. In Britain, visual and vibrating alarms are installed in the dormitory rooms of deaf students, in case of emergencies, as they sleep without wearing their hearing aids.

This is something our institutes of higher learning can emulate – a structured support system, clear and established procedures, and readily available facilities and services for students with disabilities to tap when needed.

Lastly, besides ensuring that the physical environment is accessible to students with physical disabilities, institutes of higher learning should take into account the needs of students with other disabilities such as visual impairment, hearing

impairment, mental illness and autism, as well as those with multiple disabilities.

The assistance they require might be less obvious or concrete in nature, but is no less essential.

The various disability organisations, including the Disabled People's Association, will be happy to work with institutes of higher learning on this.

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