



Left: Mr Chia Hong Sen, who has visual impairment, taking the train with his guide dog Clare, which he says most people are accepting of.

Below: Ms Sherriza Hareani Jalil, who has visual impairment, accompanied by Guide Dogs Singapore orientation and mobility specialist Cheryl Yeo while taking public transport. Ms Sherriza, who has to rely on the help of others when taking the bus, prefers the MRT as it is more predictable. PHOTOS: GUIDE DOGS SINGAPORE

Visually impaired face challenges on public transport

8 in 10 say more inclusive system needed to help them get around more efficiently: Study

Goh Yan Han

Sometimes when Ms Sherriza Hareani Jalil is heading out to meet her friends, she misses the bus as it goes by without stopping.

As she has visual impairment, the 52-year-old needs someone at the bus stop – a stranger or otherwise – to tell her when a bus is approaching and which one.

When taking a bus, Mr Chia Hong Sen, 24, who also has visual impairment, has to rely on the help of others as well if several buses arrive at the same time.

These are among the challenges that those with visual impairment face while taking public transport.

A recent Singapore Management University (SMU) study found that 79 per cent of people who are legally blind strongly agree or agree that the transport system here needs to be more inclusive for them to travel and get around more efficiently.

"This is significantly outstripped by a whopping 92 per cent of the general public who also strongly agreed or agreed," said Ms Rosie Ching, a senior statistics lecturer at SMU, who headed the study to raise awareness about the

needs of the blind. The study, done with the support of the non-profit Guide Dogs Singapore, aimed to gather the perceptions of those with visual impairment.

It also sought to learn the challenges that those with visual impairment face on public transport – "for example, can they move independently on the go, do their guide dogs know where to go", Ms Ching said.

MORE VARIABLES WITH BUSES

For buses, there are more variables to take note of, so they tend to be less convenient. It's the routes that are less travelled that are an issue. By the time I locate someone to help me, I might have missed the bus without knowing it.



MR CHIA HONG SEN, 24, who uses a guide dog.

The study surveyed 242 people who are legally blind and have no visual perception of light and need mobility aids; 50 who are legally blind, with some visual perception of light, and need mobility aids; 66 who are not legally blind but need mobility aids; and 3,375 members of the public who are not visually impaired.

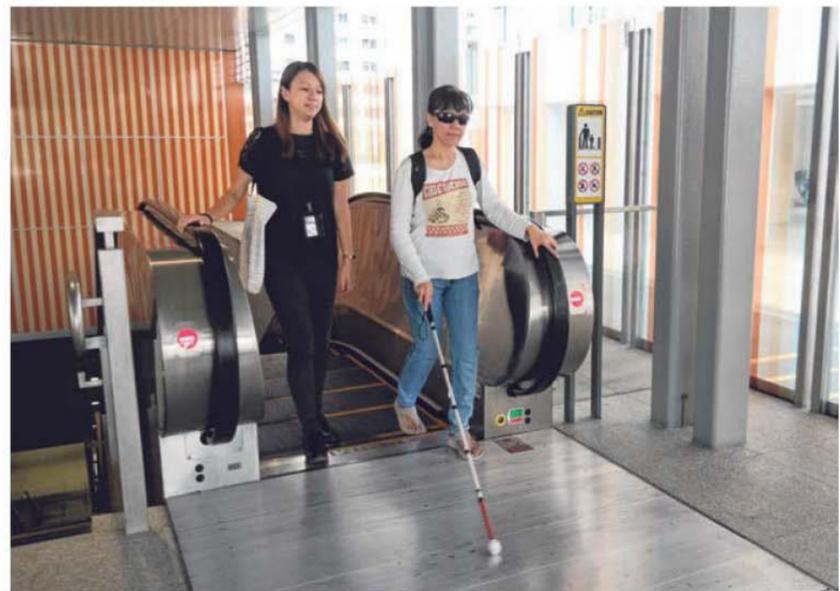
Ms Ching conducted the study with 95 SMU undergraduates as part of an introductory statistics module. The students did the interviews and did their own analysis for the module, but Ms Ching came up with her own statistical analysis for the final report.

Half of the legally blind participants in the study also thought that the current rate of improvement of transport amenities for them was not good enough, with almost 65 per cent saying they needed a guide or public assistance when travelling.

Six in 10 said they faced challenges in asking for help with their mobility needs.

Ms Cheryl Yeo, an orientation and mobility specialist at Guide Dogs Singapore, said she hopes that with the study's findings, the organisation can now better work with stakeholders to improve the environment for people with visual impairment so they can learn to be independent.

This could include making sure all traffic junctions have accurate tactile markings on the ground that



extend across the whole width of the crossing, so individuals with visual impairment do not stray onto the road.

Another way is to educate bus drivers to always stop at the front of the bus stop, even if they are, say, the third bus in line.

"This is because we teach our clients to wait at the front of the bus stop," Ms Yeo said.

Ms Sherriza, who has had visual impairment since she was 28, said she usually walks to the front of the bus stop by counting the bollards and then waits for a bus to stop.

"If other passengers are around, I will ask them what bus is coming. Cheryl also made me laminated little cards with my regular bus numbers, and I carry them sometimes to show people," she said.

However, if there is no one around, she will flag if she hears a bus coming and, after the driver stops, she will ask him what bus it is. She prefers taking the MRT, as it

is more predictable.

"I just go to the station and go to the door number that Cheryl has taught me. At the stations I'm familiar with, I know to go to door number five, I know where to exit and where to turn," she said.

Ms Sherriza, who does not work, also hopes more buses will have the audio announcements for each stop.

She added: "I wish bus stops have a call button to inform bus drivers that a person with visual impairment is waiting for the bus – like how hotels have a signal to tell cabs there are passengers in the queue."

"Then, for bus stops with fewer or no passengers waiting, I don't have to depend on my luck, because some buses fly past and don't stop."

Mr Chia said most of his routes involve taking both buses and trains.

"For buses, there are more variables to take note of, so they tend to be less convenient," he noted.

"It's the routes that are less trav-

elled that are an issue. By the time I locate someone to help me, I might have missed the bus without knowing it," he said, adding that he gives himself more buffer time if he is taking a less familiar route.

Mr Chia, who uses a guide dog, said that most people are accepting of it, which is good.

He said: "I prefer to navigate on my own if possible as I think that is more reliable. For sighted assistance, you might not get the same level of assistance every day."

"I prefer something that is relatively consistent and reliable and I know what to look out for."

The Public Transport Council is currently seeking feedback from people with disabilities and their caregivers about their travel experiences and barriers faced while using public transport through an online survey till the end of the month.

gyanhan@sph.com.sg