

# Fund helps blind NUS undergrad overcome hurdles

By PEARL LEE

BORN with glaucoma and detached retinas, Ms Amanda Chong had to rely on devices such as an electronic magnifier to help her study.

When she completely lost her eyesight about three years ago, she needed more elaborate and expensive gear.

So it came as a relief to the 20-year-old – now a first-year undergraduate in the arts and social sciences faculty at the National University of Singapore (NUS) – when the Special Education Needs (SEN) fund was established last year.

Set up by the Ministry of Education (MOE) at all polytechnics, the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), universities and art institutions, it helps students with various impairments to buy assistive devices.

Students with physical impairments can use up to \$5,000 from the fund, while those with visual or hearing impairments can use up to \$25,000.

Ms Chong has bought an iPhone app and two computer applications that convert documents to sound and read out the text for about \$4,000 in total.

She is among 30 higher education students in Singapore to have benefited from the fund to date.

“Without the fund, I probably would not buy things so readily,” she said.

“Now, I try to find things that can help me, and I don’t have to worry about the money.”

The ministry has also set up disability support offices at post-secondary institutions to support students.

Ms Agnes Yuen, 34, who



**Blind undergraduate Amanda Chong (right) bought assistive devices worth \$4,000 with the SEN fund and received help from student care manager Agnes Yuen at the disability support office in NUS. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN**

works at the NUS support office as a student care manager, has helped Ms Chong’s father apply for a permanent carpark pass as he needs to drive her around.

“Before we had the pass, my dad had to pay to park his car for a few minutes each day while he went to get me,” said Ms Chong.

Apart from such personalised help, the support offices also conduct campus tours, provide career counselling and make internship arrangements for disabled students.

In all, more than 500 disabled students have sought help from these offices, Minister of State for Education Sim Ann told Parliament on March 6, as she gave an update on the ministry’s efforts to support those with learning needs.

She said about 1,500 staff members at polys and ITEs have

received basic SEN training.

Topics covered include identifying students who might not have declared their special education needs, and simple classroom strategies to help them.

Over the next five years, all teaching staff at polys and ITEs will receive basic training in special education needs, Ms Sim noted.

Ngee Ann Polytechnic has already trained 39 of its lecturers to be SEN advisers.

Among them is auditing lecturer Koh Jo-lin, 41, who said: “For students with dyslexia, it could be something as simple as printing on cream-coloured paper, and using left-aligned text instead of text that is spread out across the full column.

“This helps them to read better.”

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