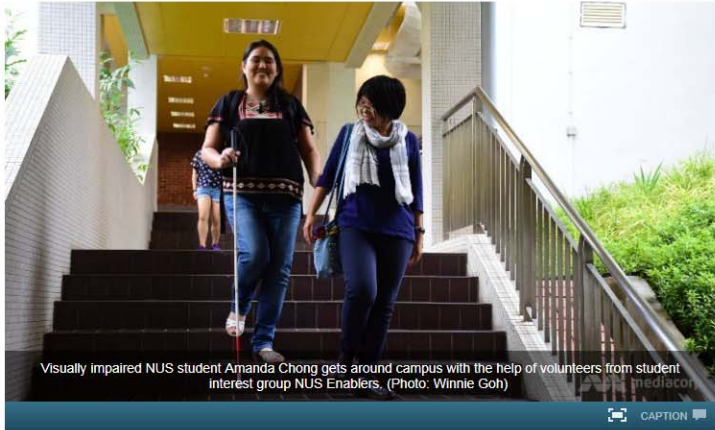


Living life to the fullest: University students with special needs

Amid the nationwide push to be a more inclusive society, local varsities are ramping up their support for students with special needs.

By Lianne Chia Posted 04 Feb 2017 09:46 Updated 04 Feb 2017 23:28



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SINGAPORE: It was a rainy Thursday evening at the National University of Singapore (NUS). The school semester was in full swing, and scores of students were waiting to board one of the internal shuttle buses that ferry staff and students around the university's sprawling Kent Ridge campus.

It can be a tight squeeze on these buses, especially during peak hours. But the situation was all the more difficult for third-year arts student Amanda Chong, who is visually impaired.



Amanda waits for a shuttle bus to arrive at a bus stop in NUS. (Photo: Winnie Goh)

"Getting around school is my main difficulty," she said. "Sometimes I have classes in different faculties, and it's tough because it's so crowded and I have to rush from place to place."

The situation is slightly better over at the Singapore Management University's (SMU) downtown campus, as the different schools are all within walking distance of each other and linked by an underground concourse. Final-year economics student Alister Ong, who has cerebral palsy, zooms around on a motorised wheelchair, navigating the ramps and easily avoiding passing students. But even then, there are challenges – like closed doors which he cannot open, or wheelchair-accessible routes with no rain shelters.

"I chose to study here because SMU is one of the more accessible universities for me and I know it will be easier for me to go to class," he said. "But accessibility and facilities can be improved even further."



Accessibility was a key factor in Alister's choice of a university. (Photo: Winnie Goh)

Getting around campus is a daily challenge for students with special needs like Amanda and Alister. But as Singapore heads in the direction of becoming a more inclusive society, more is also being done to help such students enjoy varsity life to its fullest.

ONE-STOP SUPPORT

Over the years, there has been an increase in the number of students with special needs who contact the NUS Disability Support Office (DSO) for assistance, according to an NUS spokesperson. Set up in 2014, the DSO serves as a "one stop support centre" for students with special needs – something that Amanda said was particularly useful for her.

"In the past I would have to talk to all my different professors individually about my conditions and the accommodations we need," she said. "Now the office handles it all for us, so we don't need to keep repeating ourselves."

There have also been improvements in improving campus accessibility, like the implementation of audio announcements on the internal shuttle buses.

Nanyang Technological University (NTU) has also brought its previous support arrangements for students with special needs into a dedicated and coordinated unit, known as the Accessible Education Unit, in 2014.

According to the university's Associate Provost of Student Life Kwok Kian Woon, NTU supports these students in their learning and during examinations, provides funding to acquire assistive technology devices, arranges special accommodation, industrial attachments and internships, and also provides career guidance.

"We are seeing more students coming forward to volunteer information about their condition," said Prof Kwok. "This is a reflection of the increased confidence special needs students have in the university's ability to assist them in their studies and life on campus."

Students with special needs are also given priority to apply for accommodation at NTU's halls of residence. And hall life was something that final-year biological sciences student Rick Koh said he benefitted greatly from.

"It was an amazing experience, and the seniors were really welcoming and caring," said the 24 year-old, who has Tourette's syndrome. "I felt a bit awkward for the first month or so because I was new to the concept of hall, but I got used to it after a while."

"It was like living as though I was in that TV series Friends."

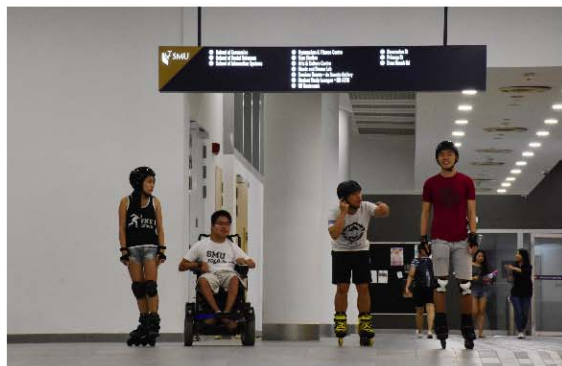
The Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) currently has five students with special needs and none with physical disabilities, according to SUTD's Assistant Director of Student Life Serena Lim. Since SUTD started in 2012, it has admitted less than five students with special needs each year.

"As we have a small community, we do not hold any programmes specifically for them," said Ms Lim. "Staff from our Student Life Office monitor and keep in contact with these students and their lecturers to ensure they are coping well academically, socially and physically."

As for SMU, the Diversity & Inclusion office addresses special needs like disabilities, but also goes beyond to cover diversity in many areas for students, faculty and staff.

"Undergraduate life is so much more than just going for classes and passing exams," said SMU's Assistant Director of Diversity & Inclusion Ho Jack Yong. "So we encourage students to have as active a student life as they can manage."

"And when they indicate to us that they would like to participate in some of these activities we work with the various offices to make sure that these experiences are available and accessible for our students with disabilities."



Alister joins the SMU skating team for an impromptu practice session. (Photo: Winnie Goh)

There has already been improvement: When Alister joined SMU in 2013, he was not able to attend the school's freshmen orientation camp as it was held at a location that was not wheelchair-accessible. But thanks to the efforts of SMU's Diversity & Inclusion team, some wheelchair users and students with hearing impairments were able to participate in last year's edition of the camp.

And even as the various universities ramp up their support, help has also come from within the student body.

GROUND-UP HELP

The roar of an engine and excited chatter of students signals an approaching shuttle bus at the NUS central forum, where Amanda is waiting at the bus stop. But even as she taps her white cane and readies herself to board the crowded bus, a reassuring hand holds on to her elbow, guiding her onto the bus and finding her a seat.



Amanda got on board the bus with the help of NUS Enablers student volunteer Lim Zheng Yi. (Photo: Winnie Goh)

The help came from her fellow student Lim Zheng Yi, a volunteer with student interest group NUS Enablers. The group helps to raise awareness of offers buddy services to students with special needs like Amanda who need help getting around campus. A group of students had started out looking at wheelchair accessible routes around the NUS campus as part of a project for a module, and the idea eventually evolved into a group with close to 30 members.

Si Lin, who's a third-year science student, explained that at the start of the semester, when students with special needs approach the university for help, the DSO will link them up with the Enablers who will take turns to buddy up with them, bring them around campus and have lunch with them. She added that the system also helps raise awareness about the students who need help on campus.

"When we buddy the students and we see our friends around campus, sometimes we all have lunch together and introduce the students to our friends," she said. "That's how they eventually make more friends and know more people."

"It also encourages them not to be afraid to talk to people...so as the semester goes by they become more comfortable with university life."



Amanda sits down for a meal with her NUS Enablers buddy Foo Jia Xin. (Photo: Winnie Goh)

LIVING TO THE FULLEST

It has been three years since Amanda first came to NUS. And studies aside, she has represented the university at an overseas conference in Chiang Mai and sat on the executive committee of the NUS Enablers.

"I thought by having a unique perspective, I would offer some insights to the Enablers about the people they are trying to support, and help them understand people like me better," she said. "For example when we organise events like going bowling, I think that's a bit tough for some of our friends who are physically or visually impaired."

"I would suggest that maybe we should change it a bit, and they would start to understand what I mean when I say we should have inclusive games and activities."

And despite her visual impairment, she has taken a further step – by taking a film module this semester. All this, she said, was thanks to the help and support she could get from her friends and the NUS community.

"I consulted the professor before I took the class, and they told me it was no problem," she said. "I borrowed the films from the library and watched them with people who described what was happening to me."

"And if I didn't get the chance to do that, I just sit next to my friends or someone nice and approachable in class, and they'll whisper in my ear to tell me what's happening."

Alister said when he first joined SMU, he was worried that he would not be able to fully participate in school activities and enjoy a rich student life. But his fears turned out to be unfounded: he has gone on overseas study trips, done a student exchange in Copenhagen, and helped to organise numerous community service projects through his CCA, SMU Caretalyt.

And despite not being able to go for his first university-wide orientation camp, he was able to attend and help organise other school camps.

"I realised after I came to SMU, things were quite easy for me," he said. "I was able to go to classes without much of an issue, and I was able to mix around and have a CCA."



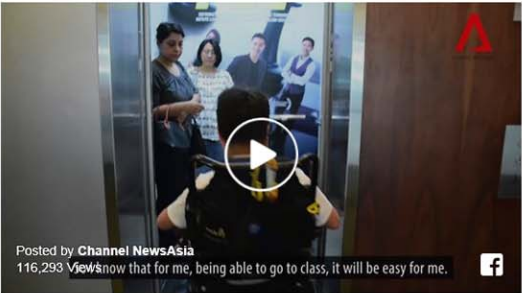
Alister enlists the help of a fellow student to help him with his laptop. (Photo: Winnie Goh)

He added that his fellow students are very accepting of him and are willing to lend a helping hand where necessary. "When I go for classes, my bag is behind me and I will need help to take out my laptop and have it plugged in to charge," he said. "My friends are very helpful, and even when I go for class and don't really know anyone there, I can just approach someone beside me and they are very willing to help."

"I've realised that people are getting more open over the years. They are more approachable and helpful towards people with different needs here in SMU, and they are more aware that there are others with disabilities who may need some help as well."

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