

Singapore Management University

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### Trailblazing inclusion in the higher education landscape

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# Trailblazing inclusion in the higher education landscape

26 Sep 2018

*Inclusion takes a village and everyone has a part to play*

What comes to mind when disability is mentioned? An impairment in the body that needs to be medically rectified? A predicament of limited societal participation? Or an oppression of the individual's preferences, wants, and needs?

These statements are characteristic of the traditional medical model of disability, that people are disabled by their bodily impairments or differences, and are what the progressive social model of disability redresses.

The social model of disability, coined by tetraplegic academic Mike Oliver, has prompted many to rethink disability. It is also the preferred disability paradigm adopted by the Singapore Management University (SMU)'s Diversity, Inclusion, and Integration (DII) team.

It advocates that people are disabled not by their impairments but by the way society is organised, and examines manners of removing barriers that restrict life choices for people. When these barriers are lowered or lifted, people with disabilities are enabled to reclaim choice and control over their own lives.

This is in line with the ideals of the United Nations Convention on Rights of People with Disabilities (2006), which Singapore has signed and ratified. It fundamentally champions for the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for a diversity of lived experiences.

So how effectively has SMU implemented the social model of disability in its policies, procedures, and practices?

We take a closer look at SMU's disability offerings and how it is set apart as a leading university locally. We also examine how the SMU disability paradigm has empowered past and present students with disabilities to access learning spaces, programmes, and activities effectively.

## Unique service offerings

The Student Assistant (SA) Programme, where student helpers are paired one-on-one with students with disabilities per module, is a hallmark of DII. SAs bridge the gap between students with disabilities and the learning content by, for instance, assisting students with visual impairment with tactile feedback.

**Hui Xin**, a fourth year student, shares that her SAs would help her with graphs and diagrams. "If I don't understand a certain graph, model, or diagram, and it's very important to the module or will be tested, we will use Wikki Stix." (Wikki Stix refers to a semi-flexible stick-like material that can be bent into various shapes.) "This helps me to follow with the class."

Students have also cited SMU's culture of open communication that has nurtured self-confidence and helped dismantled barriers.

**Alister Ong**, an alumnus who uses a wheelchair, shares: "I learnt to be vocal, to request help, so many of the minor issues are overcome by taking the initiative to ask. So to me it isn't much of a problem as obstacles can be navigated around simply by one sentence."

**Ephraim Lin**, also an alumnus who uses a wheelchair, adds that while students are usually apprehensive about vocalising in class, it helps with personal development. "I think class participation is something many people face challenges with at SMU. But going through the whole system, doing class participation, making yourself speak up, and doing presentations, definitely have helped and shaped me for who I am today."

As a city-centre university, SMU is highly accessible and features a compact campus space that makes commuting around the university convenient. Bras Basah and City Hall MRT stations are also directly connected to SMU, facilitating ease of travel. This has been one of the defining factors in attracting students with disabilities to enrol in the University.

"The main consideration was convenience of manoeuvring around. I considered other schools but they came with more landscape hurdles. If I can't get around easily I'll be more or less wasting time just travelling," reflects **Mohamed Najulah**, a second-year student who decided on SMU as his first choice of university based on ease of access.

After one year in SMU, Najulah adds that he considers the university to be "99% accessible".

Collectively, these factors contribute to levelling the playing field between students with and without disabilities, and promote cohesion and a new norm of disability inclusion practices in fostering a more equitable community.

## **Eradicating social barriers to facilitate participation and leadership**

With adequate adjustments in place, students with disabilities can play an active role in participation and leadership in classes, programmes, activities, and experience a holistic and broad-based university life.

Removing physical barriers that hinder social participation is the first key step towards inclusion. Alister recalls how SMU facilitated this: "I remember the office arranged for certain doors to remain open so that I can access the lifts easily. SMU is indeed very accessible for me."

Overseas arrangements have also been looked into for students wishing to take part in overseas exchange programmes and study trips. Alister reveals that he was initially apprehensive of travelling overseas, but with the advice and assistance of DII staff, he managed to embark on several overseas trips, including an exchange programme with the Copenhagen Business School in Denmark under the Maritime Economic Concentration Track.

"I had many questions but I consulted staff from DII and they assisted me. I brought my helper along and my peers in the same programme would travel to school daily with me.

Sometimes we would commute along the cycling pathway as they cycled while I used my wheelchair. We travelled around Europe together as well.”

Ephraim recounts his Business Study Mission, a 10- to 12-day programme to the Middle East and how support staff had facilitated the trip. “I was well taken care of. From the onset, students were assigned to look out for me.

“During the trip, there were physically demanding times. For instance we went sand dune surfing and to the desert. We went to Qatar, Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai. I had support from my classmates as well who were willing to help. I also did the trip with a good friend and the staff helped to arrange that we were staying together and within reach.”

Rather than imposing participation limits, students with disabilities are strongly encouraged to participate in campus activities and take up leadership roles. Alister shares about his role as Community Service Project (CSP) Director in SMU Caretalyst, a student-run community service group, in his first year at SMU and how it has moulded him to be more sensitive and caring.

“We always say that we want students to have a heart for the community and to create that awareness. It’s true, we don’t want to just go through the motions of the educational system without realising that there are so many more out there that are important to us as well.”

“Being CSP Director was a huge learning experience for me and I’m thankful for the opportunity,” he adds.

Ephraim sums up his experience at SMU as “positively life-changing”, and given that SMU has made a strong commitment to disability inclusion, advises that “if you embrace SMU, and every part of it, you’ll find that you’ll have a very fulfilling time.” He adds, “People here are good, students and faculty alike. That’s something I’m very thankful for at SMU.”

With appropriate measures in place, students with disabilities can and have been empowered to break the shackles of restrictive barriers and attitudes. Stakeholders and partners from the government, public and private organisations often refer to SMU’s accomplishments in DII and Disability Services as progressive and exemplary. SMU is committed to continue affording students with disabilities with such rightful opportunities and improving its services in line with universal standards.

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