

New programme to help persons with disabilities get into careers in bus and rail engineering

Ten such ITE students will undergo internships at SBS Transit each year as a foot in the door to long-term, full-time employment. BY LINDSAY WONG

THREE parties have come together to launch a training programme to put individuals with disabilities on the path to long-term, full-time careers – and with SBS Transit as the first employer-partner in the mix, these careers will be in bus and rail engineering and related areas.

The three parties are SG Enable, the focal agency for disability and inclusion in Singapore, the Singapore Institute of Management People Development Fund (SIMPDF) and the Institute of Technical Education (ITE).

Under this Enabling Pathways Programme (EPP) launched on Tuesday (Sep 3), persons with disabilities (PWDs) who go through the training will be offered openings in internships and, eventually, employment.

Minister for Transport Chee Hong Tat, who was guest of honour at the launch of the EPP at SBS Transit's Sengkang Rail Depot, said: "Under this programme, students will receive comprehensive career guidance, including information to help them choose a relevant course of study, and job-matching with participating employers for internships and career opportunities."

Ten ITE students will undergo six- to nine-month internships each year at SBS Transit to prepare them for careers in the sector. They will also be offered a chance to pursue a work-study diploma in land transport engineering at ITE, with course fees fully borne by SBS Transit.

Four students began their internships in July, and another joins them next month. Their roles include conducting component inspections, assisting in repair jobs, and maintaining various systems in depots.

Under the EPP, students on internships get S\$2,400 as an Enabling Pathway Award from SIMPDF, on top of an internship allowance from SBS Transit.

SIMPDF, incorporated as a charity in 2020 with seed funding from SIM, has set aside S\$250,000 to fund the

Enabling Pathway Awards for around 100 students over the next three years.

Lam Yi Young, board member at SIMPDF, said there were three gaps to bear in mind when the EPP was being developed:

- The difficulty faced by ITE graduates with disabilities in landing a job;
- The limited range of jobs available to such PWDs; and
- The gap between what the students studied and the jobs available.

He said: "We thought we would work together and bring in employers to create more job opportunities – not just in areas in which companies were already employing PWDs, but to open up new areas. And we worked with ITE to give (these students) better support all the way from their studies... to employment."

Ron Loh, deputy chief executive of SG Enable, added that the EPP not only imparts technical skills, but also trains the participants in managing themselves and adapting to a work environment; job coaches from SG Enable work closely with them to help them build such soft skills.

He said: "There needs to be a change in mindset from hiring for corporate social responsibility and sympathy, to empathy and recognising the strengths and abilities of PWDs, and hiring them for the correct job."

The internship roles have gone through job redesign and have been customised to match the abilities of the PWDs.

Jeffrey Sim, group chief executive of SBS Transit, said the training is run on a more hands-on approach, and tailored to suit the students' disabilities: "We take the abilities of the various interns into consideration, and we develop a bespoke training programme to cat-



From left: SG Enable chief executive Ku Geok Boon, SIMPDF chairman Patrick Tay, Minister for Transport Chee Hong Tat, SBS Transit group chief executive Jeffrey Sim, and ITE chief executive Low Khah Gek at the launch of the Enabling Pathways Programme on Tuesday. PHOTO: SBS TRANSIT

er to their needs."

For example, one of the interns needs to be seated while performing maintenance work, so her workspace was designed to accommodate that. Visual guides are also provided for interns who need them.

Lam noted SG Enable's role in preparing SBS Transit to welcome the interns by "adjusting the work process

(and) work environment, and preparing the supervisors and buddies so that the students would not feel out of place". This way, they can expect an easier transition and a good experience that would encourage them to move on to jobs in this sector, he said.

He hopes to bring more companies on board, and eventually expand the programme to other sectors that can offer internships and jobs to PWDs.

Sim said: "People's perception is that PWDs can, at best, do menial work, but we don't take that view. We find that they can make meaningful contributions, so we design the work around their abilities, rather than limiting the scope of work because of their disabilities."