

New scheme to boost job prospects of ITE students with disabilities

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Correspondent

Before starting an internship with SBS Transit in July, engineering student Nur Arfa Taqiah Mohamad Noor Azhar worried about how colleagues would view her disabilities.

“I thought they would be very judgmental,” said Ms Arfa, 18, who is hard of hearing and has multiple sclerosis.

However, her colleagues have turned out to be “very accommodating, very welcoming to people like me”, and she has enjoyed work so far.

The Institute of Technical Education (ITE) student is based in the signalling department of the bus and rail operator’s North East Line component service centre at Sengkang Rail Depot.

Ms Arfa is one of the first four students benefiting from the Enabling Pathway Programme (EPP), which was officially launched by Transport Minister Chee Hong Tat at Sengkang Rail Depot on Sept 3.

Under a three-year partnership with the EPP, SBS Transit will offer six- to nine-month internships to up to 10 ITE students per year – the first of which started in July.

The EPP aims to boost long-term employment opportunities for students with disabilities, especially in technical positions in high-growth industries.

The programme is a partnership between SIM People Development Fund (SIMPDF), disability agency SG Enable and ITE.

Those in the EPP will receive career guidance, including information to help them choose a relevant course of study, and job-matching with participating employers for internships and career opportunities.

SBS Transit was the first employer to join the programme, which is open to ITE students enrolled in automotive engineering, rapid transit engineering, electri-

cal engineering and mechanical engineering courses.

After their internships, some students may be able to pursue a work-study diploma in land transport engineering at ITE, with course fees fully borne by SBS Transit.

In addition to their internship allowances, students will receive \$2,400 as “additional support” from SIMPDF, a charity started in 2020 with seed funding from the Singapore Institute of Management.

SIMPDF has set aside \$250,000 for 100 students under the EPP for the next three years.

SBS Transit group chief executive Jeffrey Sim said the EPP marks the first time the company has hired people with disabilities for technical roles.



SUPPORTIVE COLLEAGUES

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ITE STUDENT MOHAMMAD UMRAN MOHAMMAD ZAKIROM, who is doing an internship at transport operator SBS Transit under the Enabling Pathway Programme. The 18-year-old, who has autism spectrum disorder, is one of the first four students benefiting from the scheme.

The company now employs about 30 people with disabilities, including those who assist passengers at bus interchanges and MRT stations. It designs work “around their abilities, rather than limiting the scope because of their disabilities”, Mr Sim said.

While some may think that people with disabilities can do only “menial work”, SBS Transit finds that they can make a meaningful contribution, he added.

Mr Sim said SBS Transit intends to hire about 100 more people with disabilities over the next three to four years.

More land transport companies will be approached to offer internships and employment under the EPP.

At its launch, Mr Chee urged more employers to join the programme. “While the Government will continue to do more to empower persons with disabilities across all stages of life, we need the support from everyone,” he said.

“Our businesses, community groups, families and individuals – all of us can play a role to create a more inclusive environment, where as many persons with disabilities as possible can take on meaningful job roles and contribute fully to our society.”

He acknowledged that providing such opportunities to people with disabilities “requires an investment in job redesign and training”.

“But after you go through that process, you will feel a great sense of satisfaction. You are not just doing something that is positive for society and your workers – you are also allowing the company to meet its manpower requirements,” he said, calling it a win-win for society and employers.

Mr Mohammad Umran Mohammad Zakirum, another intern at SBS Transit, is attached to the preventive maintenance team of the North East Line rolling stock department. He inspects light rail vehicles to make sure they are ready to be sent out.

“It’s been fun,” said the 18-year-old, who has autism spectrum disorder. “I like the fact that (my colleagues) are very friendly, and they’re very willing to teach me.”

The best thing his colleagues have done for him? “They treat me like any other student.”