

33 with disabilities in SUSS pilot project on inclusive hiring

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More than 30 people with disabilities such as hearing loss and autism have been hired by the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) on a part-time basis, in a six-month pilot.

Three people with lower needs were hired in areas such as graphic design, digital marketing and programme administrative support. The other 30, who have higher needs, were engaged to pack orientation goodie bags, craft thank-you cards and coasters, and prepare rooms for events.

The pilot from July to December hopes to find out the challenges and benefits of hiring people with disabilities, and will culminate in a research study by around June 2025.

The inclusive hiring project by SUSS' human resources and sustainability offices was launched as part of the university's plans to implement sustainability practices, including fostering an inclusive campus.

SUSS is also launching an applied research group called the Node for Inclusive Lifelong Education (Nile) in January 2025. It will have eight faculty staff across disciplines to study and promote lifelong learning and inclusive hiring of people with disabilities,

seniors and former offenders.

Associate Professor Lim Lee Ching, dean of the S R Nathan School of Human Development, who is leading the research group, said SUSS is in talks with social service agencies on the gaps in services for these groups of people.

The team is looking at coming up with research on inclusive education and providing training for these groups and their caregivers, as well as consultancy services to help organisations hire inclusively.

As part of its work, Nile will train pre-school teachers to assist special needs pupils who need help using the toilet.

Nile's other efforts could include courses on burnout prevention for caregivers, dementia prevention in seniors and research on autism in Singapore, Prof Lim added.

SUSS' head of special education programme, Dr Eunice Tan, who is overseeing the inclusive hiring project, said the participants with high support needs had not been able to secure a spot in day activity centres, or could not afford to attend them.

The university's human resources, sustainability and special education teams worked together to align job requirements with the skills of the 33 candi-

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Adult disability programmes need more funding: Survey

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dates, aged 20 to 40.

Briefings and onboarding sessions, mid-project check-ins and one-to-one sessions were held with the participants to address their challenges.

One of the participants is Mr Benjamin Chen, 29, a part-time administrative staff member who has autism.

Twice a week since July, he has been writing and copy-editing the school's events and information pages, on top of assisting in the marking of exam scripts.

After graduating from Nanyang Technological University with a business degree, Mr Chen worked in financial reporting in the insurance industry. He said he would often incur "significant overtime" to meet tight timelines during the reporting cycle at his previous job.

"I found it difficult to understand the spreadsheet and how it worked. Perhaps due to the tight timelines involved, I found it difficult to approach others to ask about its features and then explore it at my leisure," he said.

On what he enjoys in his current role at SUSS, he said: "My colleagues, who give the workplace a highly positive feel. Probably also the part where I got involved in script checking."

As part of a study to identify gaps in the adult disability space affecting those above 18 years old, Dr Tan interviewed 60 to 70 staff in the social service sector.

Conducted from August 2021 to January 2023, the study aimed to

assess and improve care services for adults with disabilities in Singapore, particularly those with moderate to severe special needs.

Dr Tan, who has a 23-year-old son with severe autism, said her survey found that more funding is needed to run adult disability programmes and train staff to meet standards akin to those that teachers in special education schools are held to, as they are required to have a diploma in special education.

"If the Government does not mandate these organisations to take adult disability courses, some organisations may never do it," she added.

Training staff adequately would in turn reduce staff turnover, as they are better equipped to work with those with special needs, she said.

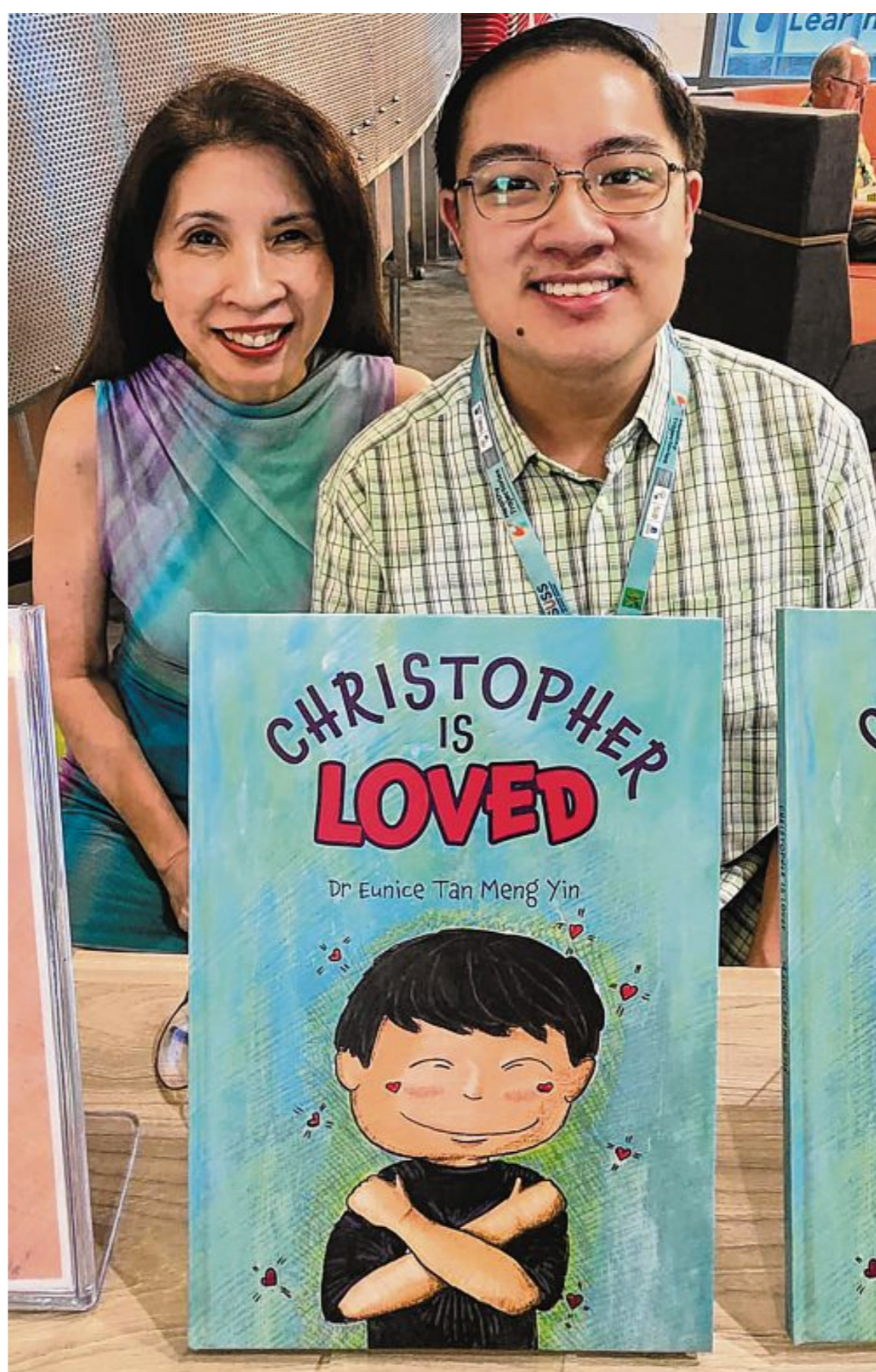
The study also found that fees are high for caregivers too, as it can cost more than \$2,000 a month for people to attend day activity centres.

Dr Tan said centres should shift towards interest- and strength-based programmes, which empower those with special needs.

"Every child, no matter how delayed, how challenged, how severe (their challenges) are, all have interests and strengths. They should not just keep working on their deficits, just working on how to walk, talk (and) eat all day and all night.

"It would be good if they could also work on some of their interests and strengths – it could be singing, puzzles, computers, dance."

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Dr Eunice Tan with Mr Benjamin Chen, who has autism. Mr Chen is a part-time administrative staff member under SUSS' inclusive hiring pilot. PHOTO: COURTESY OF EUNICE TAN