

UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

**Empowering Persons with Disabilities
through Policy Engagement**



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Prepared by The Disabled People's Association (DPA) Singapore

About the Disabled People's Association (DPA)

The Disabled People's Association (DPA) is Singapore's only cross-disability non-profit organisation. We represent the disability community, working to build a fairer society where everyone can participate in all aspects of life from education to employment and access to social integration.

A Voice of Our Own: We are an organisation for people with disabilities run by people with disabilities. We listen to the needs of all persons with disabilities in Singapore, their allies, carers and other social service organisations that provide essential services and we ensure their needs are represented at a national level. We provide a platform for all people with disabilities to speak up and ensure their voices are heard, and we represent those less able or comfortable to speak for themselves.

We help the disability community have a voice in society by working with decision-makers in political, commercial and educational institutions so that no decision that impacts us is made without us. We also provide training for both people with disabilities and the public, so we can work together to create an inclusive, accessible society we are all proud of.

To find out more about DPA's work and take part in the conversation, please visit DPA's website (www.dpa.org.sg) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/DisabledPeoplesAssociation).

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Singapore's participation in the 2nd Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Disabled People's Association (DPA) is heartened by many positive steps that the Singapore Government has taken to respect, protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities. In light of Singapore's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), this report sets out DPA's recommendations on further measures that the Singapore Government should implement to achieve the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in society:

1. Prohibit **disability discrimination in all spheres of life** and guarantee to persons with disabilities equal and effective legal protection against disability discrimination;
2. Foster an **inclusive education system** that ensures person with disabilities can access quality and free primary education, secondary education and lifelong learning on an equal basis; and
3. Enhance **physical and digital accessibility** to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life.

2. ENDING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

i. Employment discrimination

Despite the limited data on the employment of persons with disabilities, it is widely accepted that persons with disabilities face significant challenges in securing, retaining and progressing in employment. As of September 2019, it was reported that less than 30% of persons with disabilities are employed.¹ A 2015 study also found that a majority of persons with disabilities who are employed work in shelters run by Social Services Agencies.² DPA's recent study on "Discrimination In The Workplace" also highlighted cases of blatant discrimination against employees who have disclosed their disabilities.³

In January 2020, TAFEP updated its guidelines for fair employment practices to prohibit employers from requiring employees to declare mental health conditions on job application forms.⁴ In a recent review of the Employment Act, DPA also called for stronger punitive measures to address discriminatory practices in the workplace.⁵ Currently, the Employment

¹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/more-than-25-of-people-with-disabilities-are-employed>

² Ranjana Raghunathan, Balambigai Balakrishnan, Catherine J Smith and Md Kadir Mumtaz, "People with Physical Disabilities in Singapore: Understanding Disabling Factors in Caregiving, Education, Employment and Finances" (2015) SMU Change Lab, Lien Centre for Social Innovation: Research.

³ <http://www.dpa.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Discrimination-Faced-by-People-with-Disabilities-at-the-Workplace-Study.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.hcamag.com/asia/specialisation/mental-health/singapore-tackles-mental-health-discrimination/210846>

⁵ <http://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/AWARE-and-DPA-joint-submission-to-the-Public-Consultation-on-the-Employment-Act-Review.pdf>

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Act only prohibits discrimination in the context of unfair dismissals. There is no clear right to recourse for workers facing discrimination at other stages of employment, and no legal duty for employers to avoid it. If complaints are made to the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP), it may mediate but in cases where mediation does not resolve the dispute, it cannot take enforcement measures such as reinstatement, compensation or punishment.

Though Government has strengthened its support for initiatives such as the Open Door Programme (ODP),⁶ there remains no legal requirement for employers to provide employees with disabilities with reasonable accommodations. The ODP also relies on a limited definition of disability that excludes persons with psychosocial disabilities.

Furthermore, despite Government funding, support and training programmes for employers and job applicants with disabilities, many remain unaware of their existence. Amongst employers, misconceptions about how to make reasonable adjustments for persons with disabilities remain prevalent, which make it more difficult for persons with disabilities to be integrated into the labour market. Recently however, SG Enable launched the Enabling Mark – a national-level accreditation framework to recognise inclusive employers. The Enabling Mark seeks to incentivise organisations to build a positive corporate image with disability-inclusive hiring and support them as they improve their inclusive employment practices.⁷

ii. Insurance discrimination

The Singapore Government placed a reservation on Article 25(e) of the CRPD, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by private insurers. The national insurance, MediShield Life, while does provide insurance coverage for all citizens in Singapore, is only meant for large hospital costs. People often buy private health insurance to defray other treatment costs and this is not available to many persons with disabilities. This has resulted in significant challenges faced by persons with disabilities who encounter outright rejections, additional loading fees and over-reaching exclusions when purchasing private insurance.⁸

iii. Constitutional prohibition against disability discrimination

Article 12(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, race, descent and place of birth. The Government should pass a constitutional amendment to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability under Article 12(2). This will send a clear and unequivocal signal that persons with disabilities are to be treated on an equal basis with others in Singapore.

⁶ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/job-support-for-persons-with-disabilities-to-continue-despite-covid-19-pandemic>; the Open Door Programme (ODP) is a government funded grant initiative by the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF), and Workforce Singapore (WSG). It is administered by SG Enable. The ODP aims to encourage employers to hire, and train up people with disabilities. The grant supports redesigning of jobs, skills upgrading, and recruitment of persons with disabilities.

⁷ <https://www.sgenable.sg/Pages/NewsEventsDetails.aspx?type=News&ItemID=233&source=NewsAndEvents>; SG Enable's Enabling Mark Programme

⁸ <https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/govt-help-needed-to-tackle-insurer-bias-against-autism>

Recommendations

- (1) include disability as a prohibited ground of discrimination under the Constitution;
- (2) Enact an anti-discrimination legislation to prohibit discrimination at all stages of employment;
- (3) Remove the reservation on Article 25(e) of the CRPD and prohibit private insurers from discriminating on the basis of disability;
- (4) Expand and update the Government definition of disability to be inclusive of the entire disability population in Singapore, including persons with psychosocial disabilities, in line with the social model of disability enshrined in the CRPD;
- (5) Collect additional employment-related data from persons with disabilities, such as persons with disabilities' job satisfaction levels, duration of job stints, professional and emotional wellbeing, and acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

3. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

As of March 2020, it was reported that 80% of children with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream schools while those with moderate to severe disabilities enrol in Special Education Schools (SPED).⁹

Concerns are not limited to SPED schools alone, as the current curriculum for teachers does not provide adequate training to support children with disabilities in Government schools. This could pose a challenge for children who might have the intellectual agility but lack the social and verbal skills to express themselves. Additionally, when working with students with severe disabilities, a lower student to staff ratio is ideal. With the lack of qualified teachers, these numbers are bound to increase, thus affecting the quality of education – which further affects students' academic ranking, widening the academic gap. In recent years, the Government has been providing a stronger emphasis on life skills (as opposed to relying solely on academic qualifications), however the social system has yet to catch up. Schools will need to overhaul their curriculum to cater for the more diverse learning styles and needs of children with disabilities.

In 2018, a survey found that a majority of Singaporeans believe that inclusive education is crucial in creating an inclusive society (80%) while 71% believe that both groups of children could equally benefit from inclusive education.¹⁰ However, a majority of early intervention professionals surveyed highlighted three key challenges to achieving inclusive education in Singapore:

⁹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-students-with-special-education-needs-to-get-more-help-and-teaching-support>

¹⁰ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/spore-inclusive-society-only-11-cent-those-who-work-special-needs-kids-think-so>

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- a lack of resources for mainstream schoolteachers to attend to children with disabilities (66%),
- an education system that emphasises standardised tests (58%), and
- mainstream teachers who are not sufficiently trained (58%).

While the Compulsory Education Act (CAE) was amended in 2016 to extend compulsory education to children with moderate to severe disabilities,¹¹ there remain significant disparities for those who are enrolled in SPED schools:

- SPED schools charge higher school fees than mainstream schools.¹² While lower income families can apply for means tested subsidies for SPED school fees and some SPED schools have reduced school fees in 2019,¹³ children with disabilities should pay the same school fees as those attending mainstream schools;
- Children with disabilities are not guaranteed enrolment at SPED schools compared to those applying to enrol in mainstream schools;
- While the Ministry of Education introduced bite-sized online learning modules for teachers to cater to students with disabilities in 2020,¹⁴ this may not be sufficient to adequately support children with disabilities who are enrolled in mainstream schools.

In 2019, a workgroup was set up to integrate children with disabilities into pre-schools and strengthen support for children with moderate to severe developmental needs within pre-schools.¹⁵ Higher subsidies and a lower income criteria were introduced to improve access to early intervention programmes.¹⁶ However, an analysis of the 8 tiers of subsidies reveals that the lowest fee is between SGD80 and SGD263 for the lowest income group (per capita household income of SGD0-SGD1,000), which may still not be affordable for parents from lower income groups.

In 2014, the Government launched the SkillsFuture fund to promote lifelong learning and support Singaporeans in developing their fullest potential throughout life. However, there is no requirement that the programmes supported under the SkillsFuture programme are accessible for persons with disabilities.¹⁷

¹¹ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/moe-extends-compulsory-education-special-needs-children>

¹² Singaporean children in mainstream schools pays fees amounting to approximately SGD 13 per month for Primary education, and SGD 25 per month for Secondary education while SPED school fees could amount to SGD 350 a month.

¹³ <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/3-new-special-education-schools-serve-growing-needs-fees-6-schools-be-lowered>

¹⁴ <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-students-with-special-education-needs-to-get-more-help-and-teaching-support>

¹⁵ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/move-to-have-a-more-inclusive-pre-school-education>

¹⁶ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/more-support-for-kids-with-special-needs>

¹⁷ https://www.dpa.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/CRPD-Parallel-Report_DPA-Singapore.pdf at page 11.

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Though mainstream schools and public universities offer many foreign languages to students, Singapore Sign Language (SgSL) has been offered only at a few institutions.¹⁸ Neither has SGSL been recognised as an official language in Singapore.

Additionally, the lack of nationwide statistics on disability makes it difficult to test the effectiveness of national inclusive education campaigns and initiatives. DPA urges the Singapore Government to obtain disability specific data, utilising the Washington Group Short Set of Disability Questions, so that accurate statistics can be recorded.

Recommendations

- (1) Implement a more robust framework for teachers in mainstream schools in terms of manpower, job scope, salary, skills training and overall professional development;
- (2) Ensure that all pre-schools are inclusive and can support both children with and without disabilities in the same environment;
- (3) Allocate more resources towards the development and recognition of Braille and Singapore Sign Language (SgSL) as official languages in Singapore, so as to enhance inclusivity and accessibility for those who use them;
- (4) Increase accessibility to post-education skills upgrading by:
 - a) Strengthening the transition between education and employment through the structured opening of higher-skill employment and job training opportunities for persons with disabilities at all stages in life;
 - b) increasing the range of jobs for persons with disabilities;
- (5) Ensure and publicly commit to government-supported skills upgrading courses being accessible to persons with disabilities;
- (6) Increase the Early Intervention Programme for Infants and Children (EIPIC) subsidy under the Enhanced Pilot for Private Intervention Providers (PPIP) scheme for families in the lowest income group.

4. PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY

i. Physical accessibility

The Singapore Government has continued its efforts to build a physically accessible city for wheelchair users and persons with disabilities.

¹⁸ <https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/newsroom/31-march-2020-sign-language-module-offers-students-unique-learning-opportunity-and-insight-on-deaf-culture/>;
http://news.ntu.edu.sg/pages/newsdetail.aspx?URL=http://news.ntu.edu.sg/news/2017/Pages/NR2017_Mar14.aspx&Guid=e09e9067-a589-49fb-871f-845e66d245ab&Category=News%20Releases

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- In 2019, the Code on Accessibility in the Built Environment was revised to introduce new requirements for (i) accessible toilets on every floor and (ii) accessible changing rooms.¹⁹
- As of October 2019, 99% of all public buses are wheelchair accessible.²⁰
- In 2020, the Land Transport Authority also launched a mobile application leveraging assistive technologies to provide commuters with disabilities with personalised journey guidance and assistance, such as the estimated time of arrival and notifications to board or alight buses.²¹
- All Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) trains have an SMRT Active Route Map Information System (STARiS) that provides journey information as well as a mounted display on the ceiling of the carriage that provides multi-lingual transcripts of audio announcements.²²

However, while existing regulations support the use of Guide Dogs in food establishments and public transport,²³ many guide dog users with visual impairments continue to face challenges due to a lack of public awareness and effective complaint mechanism.²⁴

Additionally, in 2019 DPA conducted the first of its annual public mapping exercises in the Central Business District of Singapore. One of the issues it highlighted was the lack of connectivity and accessibility for persons with disabilities when construction projects rerouted accessible routes. The Government must ensure that all disruptions to accessible routes, however temporary, should adhere to the Building and Construction Authority (BCA) Code on Accessibility in the Built Environment.

ii. Digital accessibility

Access to information is an important aspect of being independent and interacting with society on an everyday basis. The Internet is meant to be a platform that is accessible to people despite where they happen to live in the world, what language they speak and how technologically savvy they are. Increasingly people are relying on the internet to conduct more and more of their essential daily tasks, such financial transactions, educational support, work, accessing government services and social networking. Additionally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, increased reliance on digital technology for information and contact tracing efforts proved to be a challenge for people with disabilities due to inaccessible websites and interfaces. Many contact tracing regulations relied on the use of “QR codes” and not all official government announcements and speeches were in accessible alternative formats.

¹⁹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/new-building-rules-to-improve-accessibility-for-elderly-disabled>

²⁰ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/wheelchair-users-can-board-nearly-all-public-buses-with-unveiling-of-new-electric-bus>

²¹ <https://www.intelligenttransport.com/transport-news/96848/singapores-lta-launches-transport-safety-and-accessibility-initiatives/>

²² <https://www.smrtrains.com.sg/Journey-with-Us/Travel-Information/Accessibility>

²³ https://www.guidedogs.org.sg/programme/guide-dogs/guide_dog_access/

²⁴ <https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/singapore-swimmer-guide-dog-turned-away-subway-staff-kallang-wave-mall>; <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/rsh-limited-apologises-to-guide-dog-owner-cassandra-chiu-for-commotion-at-zara>

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When web services and platforms are not accessible to persons with disabilities this in effect leaves the largest minority group on earth behind. Removing barriers online such as inaccessible web pages or pages that are not in Simple English or designed to be screen reader friendly is the first step that the Singapore Government can take to ensure that people are not excluded in Singapore's journey to be a Smart Nation. Given the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN), this is also an opportunity to be a leader in how to build accessibility into smart nation planning in the region.

Furthermore, access to information is enshrined as a basic right in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Access to information is a critical step in enabling people with and without disabilities to engage with government services on an equal basis with other Singaporeans. It also allows persons with disabilities to be informed about programmes, schemes and grants that they can tap on, as well as be kept up to date on critical government policies that affect them, from educational to community policies. If we truly mean to implement the CRPD and foster independent living we cannot rely on third parties or proxies to continue to relay information to persons with disabilities.

Accessibility is the first step to being able to get accurate and up to date information on accessibility in schools, to signing up for community programmes at their community centres and not having to rely on others to do this for them or getting second-hand information that may not be as reliable. There are many benefits for the Government to ensure that websites are accessible. Providing this information online in an accessible format could reduce the amount of extra time persons with disabilities waste trying to get information via alternative methods such as calling or meeting with the staff at government institutions and offices, as well as cut down on the repetition of information and assistance that civil service may have to provide. In addition, information online can also be easily updated to reflect changes and updates.

As Singapore transitions into a Smart Nation and more services move onto the Internet, access to information is more critical than ever, especially with websites being revamped and additional e-services being offered. The importance of web accessibility should be considered at the initial stages of planning because that will always be less costly than attempting to overhaul an existing web page or e-service. As the internet continues to grow in importance in our lives, from education to employment, from government to commerce, it is important that information remains readily available to everyone in society. For example, as Singapore encourages older people and people with disabilities to upgrade their skills, more courses can be conducted online instead of at physical classrooms which would be more accessible and reduce the cost incurred by providers.

An accessible website and/or government service page is also one of the easiest ways to ensure that people can easily find accurate information (especially when we're in the era of tackling "fake news"), and that people are able to conduct transactions safely and securely.

In 2018, the new Digital Service Standards were introduced to improve accessibility and require all government websites to comply with the World Wide Web Consortium Web

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Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0.²⁵ These standards, however, have not been strictly enforced and many government websites remain inaccessible.

There is currently no requirement for television broadcasters to ensure that closed-captioning as well as sign language interpreters are provided across free-to-air and paid television channels. The closed captioning that is available on streaming platforms such as Netflix is a best practice example that should be adopted on other broadcast service providers.

Singapore has ratified the Marrakesh Treaty, which facilitates access to copyrighted works for persons with reading disabilities. In doing so, Singapore amended the Copyright Act to allow copyrighted materials to be reproduced in any accessible format, enabling institutions dedicated to persons with disabilities to produce copyrighted materials in formats accessible to those with reading disabilities.

Though the Government provides up to 90% means-tested subsidies to persons with disabilities under the Assistive Technology Fund (ATF) to purchase assistive technology devices to enable independent living, it is subject to a lifetime cap of SGD 40,000 and applicants must earn household gross monthly income per person of SGD 2,000 and below.

iii. Access to public services

Live signing in Singaporean Sign Language (SgSL) has been provided for key Government communications in collaboration between the Singapore Government and the Singapore Association for the Deaf (SADeaf).²⁶ Notwithstanding, such live signing is not provided on the national broadcasts but on SADeaf's Facebook page. This has also been the case for critical Covid-19 announcements as well as for the recent elections broadcasts.

In addition, it is not mandatory for public hospitals to provide sign interpretation for Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing patients. While the Supreme Court of Singapore accepts the use of sign language in court and will provide a sign language interpreter free of charge where necessary, this crucial information is not published on the Supreme Court website and may not be widely known to persons with disabilities.

Banking services are also not fully accessible.²⁷ Though Braille instructions and audio guidance have been introduced to some Automated Teller Machines (ATMs), there is no legal requirement for banks to ensure that their services and infrastructure are accessible to persons with disabilities. Accessible features should include braille letters on online banking tokens, automated voice guides at ATMs and online banking, and accessible ATMs where wheelchair users can reach the screen and keypad comfortably.

Recommendations

²⁵ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/technology/singapore-public-agencies-to-observe-new-design-standards-for-10370524>

²⁶ <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Overseas-Mission/Geneva/Mission-Updates/2020/07/Singapore-Reply-to-the-JC-for-SPMH-Covid-19-27-July-2020>

²⁷ <http://www.sharingthelioncity.com/barriers-prevent-disabled-from-managing-finances-independently/>

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- (1) Require public hospitals to train some members of their staff in sign language to ensure fewer barriers to accessing healthcare for persons with hearing loss;
- (2) Re-evaluate the criteria for means-testing for Assistive Technology Fund subsidies to ensure that lower-income persons with disabilities are able to access Assistive Technology;
- (3) Collaborate with banks, potentially through the Association of Banks in Singapore, to improve the accessibility of financial services for persons with disabilities;
- (4) Ensure consistent accessibility in television broadcasts by encouraging service providers to adopt closed-captioning as well as sign language interpreters across both free-to-air and paid television channels.