A private-public partnership is giving opportunities to youths with special needs to receive vocational training.

BY KAREN CHAPMAN educate@thestar.com.my

JUST like the rest of his classmates, Clement Ooi enjoys going to class. Clement, who is autistic, attends specially tailored IT classes three times a week and once he finishes in February next year, he will obtain a Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM).

His mother Annie Kam said Clement likes working with computers. "Previously, his knowledge of computers was more on searching for his interests on YouTube but now that he has learnt how to use Microsoft Office tools to make PowerPoint presentations and develop websites, I can see him practising his new skills at home," she said.

Like Clement, Janet Lee said her son, Tay Kuan Ting who is a slow learner and dyslexic, loves to attend the classes which are being held at Sunway University.

"He travels here by himself or he will ask Annie who lives near us, for a ride. "I can see the improvement in his character and how he enjoys using Microsoft Word to type out the song lyrics he likes," she said.

Both Kam and Lee hope that the programme initiated under the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu) can continue. "Perhaps Pemandu can look into providing employment too. They are able to handle data processing with supervision as they are hardworking and don't complain," said Kam.

Lee said she is thankful to Pemandu and Sunway for ensuring that youth with special needs are given opportunities to learn and gain employment.

A skilled option

According to Pemandu Education National Key Results Area director Tengku Nurul Azian Tengku Shahriman, a special education needs lab was held in October last year to identify initiatives to address issues in the area.

"The Special Education Needs (SEN) Vocational Programme was proposed as an initiative under the private-public partnership to create opportunities in vocational education for youths with special needs," she said.

An estimated 95% of people with disabilities are unemployed. Untapped potential from those with disabilities results in sizeable GDP loss for the country.

Under this initiative, Tengku Nurul Azian added, the Government will sponsor students with special needs to pursue vocational programmes in private institutions.

Participant institutions will not only provide courses which lead to SKM certification but also ensure that students acquire industrial placement. When told that parents of several youths with special needs attending the classes at Sunway hoped the programme would continue, Tengku Nurul Azian said it would continue next year, with additional seats offering diplomas in Patisserie and certificates in Food and Beverage being bought in Berjaya University College of Hospitality for 70 students.

The first intake commenced in February and among the institutions selected are Suria College of Hospitality in Johor and International College of Yayasan Melaka in Malacca.

"Moving forward, the ministry will continue to conduct assessments of institutions and offer sponsorship to SEN youths in various institutions to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to be self-sufficient," she said.

Sunway International Business and Management director Kanendran T. Arulrajah said the programme which was presently eight months, should be extended to one year as the first few months were used to enable students to be comfortable using computers as not all had been exposed to them.

On the possibility of a further partnership with Sunway International Business and Management under a SEN programme in the future, Tengku Nurul Azian said Pemandu would review the proposed programme and revise content or schedule of training to ensure that the programme provides better learning outcomes for the students.

"It has been challenging and everyone learns at a different pace so I provide more attention to those who need it," he said.

One of the students with special needs from the class, Sharifah Alia Syed Sahabudin said she enjoyed the classes.

"I am learning different things such as Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word," she said. "It has been challenging and everyone learns at a different pace so I provide more attention to those who need it," she said. One of the students with special needs from the class, Sharifah Alia Syed Sahabudin said she enjoyed the classes.

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Meanwhile, Kam said her son wants to attend class everyday.

"When he asked me what he should wear, I thought he was regressing but actually, Melvin is teaching them to dress in office attire so he (Clement) wanted me to help him decide what shirt to wear," she said.

Elvin Lee said his son, Adam, who has hyperthyroid, was now more confident thanks to the classes.

"I wish the programme can be extended as I see him enjoying the classes. He didn't like to read before but now he revises what he learns at home," he said.

CK Chan said his son Keng Yew, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, is now more sociable and confident. "He looks forward to the classes to learn and mix with his friends," he said.

Look here: Poon (right) giving a helping hand to Wei Meng.

Skills for everyone