

# THE STRAITS TIMES

## Digital literacy lessons, certifications for ex-offenders



Mr Hameed Maricar (left) and other ex-offenders meeting Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social and Family Development Eric Chua (second from right) at the launch of Acronis-HCSA Computer Classroom on April 17, 2023. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

**Hana Chen**

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**SINGAPORE** - When Mr Hameed Maricar was released from prison in 2020, he set out to share his craft as a batik artist, holding workshops and exhibiting his work.

But the 53-year-old, who creates contemporary art, was held back by his rudimentary digital skills.

Although he had participated in digital literacy courses for inmates while in prison for drug-related offences, his skills were rusty, as he did not have the opportunity to use a computer to reinforce what he had learnt.

So, he took a course in Microsoft Office in April. Under the guidance of trainers from Avantus Training, Mr Hameed refreshed his skills in Microsoft Word, PowerPoint and Excel, picking up an International Certificate of Digital Literacy at the end of the six-day course.

“With PowerPoint, I can do my introduction, and explain the materials we use and everything step by step so that the student can understand,” said the self-employed batik artist, who frequently works with local art studios to hold batik-painting workshops.

Mr Hameed and nine other former offenders were in the pilot batch at the Acronis-HCSA Computer Classroom, which was launched on Monday with the aim of uplifting former convicts by training them in digital literacy skills.

The computer classroom is at the HCSA Highpoint Halfway House, a residential shelter in Geylang for homeless former offenders. It is a joint initiative of HCSA Community Services (HCSA), the Yellow Ribbon Fund and Singapore-founded cyber-security firm Acronis.



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The 12-seater facility will offer classes in Microsoft Office, e-mail composition and other fundamental skills for the digital workplace, as well as job interview training. It is open to all former offenders, not just residents of the halfway house.

The initiative was funded by Acronis, which contributed \$100,000 through the Yellow Ribbon Fund. Half was used for renovation and equipping the classroom, while the remaining \$50,000 will be used for training and certification courses conducted by Avantus. Acronis also sponsored a computer classroom in Jamiyah Halfway House in February 2022.

“Our goal has always been to be a source of support for ex-offenders, to help them reintegrate (into society) as smoothly as possible, and to create not just jobs but also careers for them,” said Mr Yeo Jih-Shian, vice-president of the HCSA board of directors.

“This is why we continue to upgrade our facilities and upskilling opportunities at our shelter – to encourage learning and to ensure they remain employable.”

The joint initiative is part of HCSA’s efforts to reduce long-term recidivism among former offenders by providing them with the skills and support they need to find employment after their release.

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Mr Hameed Maricar is now a self-employed batik artist. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Singapore had one of the lowest two-year recidivism rates globally, at 20.4 per cent. However, the likelihood of a former convict reoffending within five years stood at around 40 per cent, noted Mr Eric Chua, Senior Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Social and Family Development, as well as the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

To lower this, the Government has taken on an “ecosystem approach”, looking to enhance the employability of former offenders, strengthen social support, increase acceptance and build partnerships in the community, added Mr Chua, who was guest of honour at the launch.

In an increasingly digital workforce, it is a norm for employers to look at digital skills as a baseline requirement. Community-led initiatives like the Acronis-HCSA Computer Classroom, which aim to help former offenders upskill and enhance their employability, are critical to the rehabilitation and reintegration strategy, he said.

Yellow Ribbon Fund chairman Edmund Cheng said: “Equipping ex-offenders with skills relevant for the workforce will empower them to rebuild their lives as they secure better jobs and contribute positively to the society.”

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