



(From far left) Ms Li Jizhi, research assistant at SUSS' Business Intelligence and Analytics unit; Associate Professor Sylvia Chong, project lead of the unit; Mendaki chief executive Rahayu Buang; Mendaki deputy chief executive Aidaroyani Adam; and Ms Siti Afiyah Mustapha, senior research and planning executive at Mendaki. SUSS and Mendaki are working on a project to understand the effectiveness of the self-help group's flagship programme – the Mendaki Tuition Scheme – which it has been running since 1982.

ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

Mendaki, SUSS working to find out what affects students' grades

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

While pupils' grades tend to dip between Primary 3 and Primary 5, many parents who approach self-help group Yayasan Mendaki for tuition assistance do so only in the run-up to the Primary School Leaving Examination when their children are in Primary 5 or Primary 6.

This was an interim finding of a research project by the group, which is working with the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS).

The aim of the project is to understand the effectiveness of the group's flagship programme – the

Mendaki Tuition Scheme – which it has been running since 1982.

The project started in March this year and is expected to take at least two years.

Yayasan Mendaki, which targets the bottom 30 per cent of Malay/Muslim families, launched the programme with 880 students more than 30 years ago and, to date, more than 200,000 students have benefited from the tuition it offers.

With an average of between 8,000 and 9,000 children from Primary 1 to Secondary 5 registering for the programme every year, the group wants to do better by identifying factors that primarily influence their academic performance.

Using data analytics based on information collected from its cohorts last year and this year, the project aims to draw insights about the students and families the group helps and what more support they might need. It is headed by Associate Professor Sylvia Chong, project lead of SUSS' Business Intelligence and Analytics unit, and also involves two Mendaki staff from its research and planning department.

The research project received about \$180,000 from philanthropic organisation Temasek Foundation.

Mendaki chief executive Rahayu Buang said researchers are now in the process of cleaning up data it

has collected over the years, and fixing the gaps so it can have fuller sets of data for more meaningful studies. The study is using data from about 6,000 students.

About 75 per cent of the students in the tuition programme are from the lower-income bracket, with a net monthly household per capita income of \$450.

Starting this year, students joining Mendaki's tuition classes must provide details like their parents' occupations and residence type. These have shown to be significant indicators of how students perform in their studies, according to the study's initial analysis of 24 factors.

Other factors include students'

class attendance patterns and who signs them up for tuition, as it could be an indicator of their main caregiver.

From this year, all students must take a pre-test in English, mathematics and science when they register for classes, regardless of when they join. In the past, those who came on board the tuition programme later in the year did not have to sit the test.

"Now we can validate our hunches and guesses with concrete evidence and data to say at which point we should put our resources in," said Madam Rahayu.

In the long run, Mendaki also hopes to track students who have

gone through its pre-school programmes to see if intervention given earlier makes an impact.

The group is also expected to release results of a review of its tuition programmes next year.

Madam Rahayu said it hopes to contribute to national conversations about issues such as social inequality, which affects some students in the Malay/Muslim community.

Mendaki organised its first dialogue with the Institute of Policy Studies in October on the topic of uplifting Malay/Muslim youth and how to support their aspirations.

ateng@sph.com.sg