

Trio win Philip Yeo Initiative scholarships

Beyond funding, programme opens doors, offers valuable mentorship

By LINETTE LAI

UNDERGRADUATE Kenneth Lou was fed up with having to use clunky portable phone chargers, so he designed his own.

The result: a sleek, wireless charging case that takes Mr Lou a step closer to his dream of a wireless world.

Besides raising nearly \$120,000 on Kickstarter, the 23-year-old's vision also caught the attention of those behind the Philip Yeo Initiative.

Mr Lou is now one of the first three to be picked as an associate with the Initiative. This means access to a programme that provides funding, mentorship and networking opportunities.

First launched in 2013 with an initial backing of \$5 million, the Philip Yeo Initiative recently raised more than half a million through a golf and dinner event.

With matching government grants, the fund is expected to total around \$6 million.

The programme offers two types of scholarships.

The first – an offshoot of the National University of Singapore's Overseas Colleges programme – gives 10 students the opportunity to spend up to a year studying and working in entrepreneurial hubs all over the world.

The second, which Mr Lou is part of, grants winners up to \$20,000 in funding to realise their projects.

The other two winners are 28-year-old Fitzkhoo Liang, who studied engineering science, and 29-year-old Jan Lim, who studied architecture.

Participants said the value of the programme is in the doors it opens and the experience its mentors bring to the table.

Mr Lou recalled how the idea for his product won many busi-



(From left) Mr Kenneth Lou, Mr Fitzkhoo Liang and Ms Jan Lim won scholarships from the Philip Yeo Initiative, which offers funding, mentorship, and networking opportunities. PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

ness plan competitions, but got off to a slow start until his mentor gave him a wake-up call.

"He asked me, do you want to win business plan awards forever? Or do you want to start a compa-

ny?" said Mr Lou.

For Ms Lim, whose project is about helping communities play a

bigger part in shaping their environment, the game-changer was taking two trips to New York and Copenhagen.

"That was quite a pivotal moment – speaking to the people in the design industry," she said.

But while the mentors provide support and guidance, they do not spoon-feed their young charges.

"There's no guarantee that if you join this programme you won't fail," said Mr Liang, who is trying to develop a universal handyman service to meet seniors' housekeeping needs.

"In February, my company crashed. I was shell-shocked. But my mentors weren't. They just said pick yourself up and go at it again."

Those behind the recent fund-raising effort, such as Ms Chong Siak Ching, said that the programme is about opening doors for those with a clear goal and the passion to achieve it.

"It is not for us to tell them what to do," she said. "It is for them to tell us what they need to succeed."

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