

Plan for drones to deliver parcels takes flight

Airbus shows off Skyways system and hopes for full trial at NUS by middle of this year

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Santa and his reindeer could be out of work at the National University of Singapore (NUS) this Christmas.

Students there could be delivering gifts using drones, with recipients getting a phone message telling them to pick up their present from a parcel station.

There was a buzz on campus yesterday as European planemaker Airbus completed the first flight demonstration of its Skyways unmanned air vehicle – two years after the project was launched in collaboration with the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS).

Singapore Post came on board as a logistics partner in April last year.

It remains to be seen, however, whether drones will send parcels across the island, although stakeholders say the project has been making good progress.

The inaugural flight demonstration for the media saw a drone take off from its maintenance platform, land on a station metres away and collect a parcel through a hatch.

The drone, which was controlled remotely, took two to three minutes to land on the station and retrieve the parcel before taking off.

Skyways project leader Leo Jeoh from Airbus told *The Straits Times* that when the drones are

flying autonomously and more data is collected, operations should be smoother.

The project is at an advanced stage of development.

The team behind it hopes to have a fully operational trial under way at the university by the middle of this year, with autonomous drones flying in pre-defined routes. They will drop off packages weighing less than 4kg at parcel lockers across the campus, which is the

size of 150 football fields.

Each machine has eight motorised rotors, and the drone can fly even if half of them are out of action. They will not be flown in bad weather conditions such as heavy thunderstorms and strong winds.

“We are prepared to take this project nationally,” CAAS director-general Kevin Shum said at the demonstration. “But it needs to be done on a ‘phase’ basis.”

He added that the project has to

prove its safety to the authorities and users before moving on to the next stage. But he stopped short of specifying a timeline due to the nature of research and development.

Mr Freddy Chang, SingPost’s vice-president of operations, added that no-fly zones will have to be considered if the project is expanded.

There are also concerns over how the public will react to the gadgets.

CAAS senior director (safety regulation) Tan Kah Han said one risk

factor considered was the drones causing distractions to cars on the nearby Ayer Rajah Expressway.

He added that educating the public about the system will minimise adverse reaction.

Mr Alain Flourens, Airbus Helicopters’ chief technical officer, said: “Safe and reliable urban air delivery is a reality not too distant into the future.”

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A drone landing on the maintenance platform after being loaded with a parcel during the demonstration at the National University of Singapore yesterday, as Skyways staff watched from a control tower. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID



SCANTO WATCH
See the delivery drone in action.
<http://str.sg/deliverdrone>

