

Right: The facial recognition door lock is used for entry to the offices and labs at innovation4.0.

Far right: At the smart cafe, robot baristas use facial recognition technology to serve regular customers coffee suited to their tastes.  
ST PHOTOS:  
KHALID BABA



# NUS aims to seed, incubate 250 tech-based start-ups

University will spend \$25m over five years and use the latest technologies to do so

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National University of Singapore's (NUS) newest building, innovation4.0, boasts a smart cafe where

robot baristas use facial recognition and machine learning technologies to serve regular customers the perfect cup of coffee suited to their tastes.

Going forward, NUS hopes the state-of-the-art, six-storey building will serve up more than coffee. It

will serve as the base from which the university plans to seed, incubate and launch up to 250 tech-based start-ups. It will spend \$25 million over five years in the process and use the latest technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to do this.

Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat announced the scheme called the Graduate Research Innovation Programme (Grip) at the official opening of innovation4.0 or i4.0 at the Kent Ridge campus yesterday.

He said NUS will tap its highly-skilled pool of graduate students, post-doctoral researchers and staff to establish and run the start-ups, employing cutting-edge technologies that will give them a sustained advantage over incumbents.

Those selected will embark on a three-month business validation and venture creation programme, and work with tech start-up veterans to learn the principles and practice of customer needs and market sizing.

"Grip will move research out-

comes from NUS labs to the market and bring the next generation of technologies to the Singapore and global markets," said Mr Heng, who is also chairman of National Research Foundation.

He noted that by locating researchers and innovators working on cutting-edge technologies in one building "the entire value chain to unlock innovation and create value from our digital assets can now be found at a single physical location".

Mr Heng said the Government had invested significantly to ensure that the economy can exploit the new opportunities enabled by digital convergence and it was prepared to invest more.

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# Firms will create innovation-based jobs

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But he added that the Government “must also differentiate and go deep” because many large corporations and countries are also investing heavily in digital technologies.

“So we will invest strategically and play to our strengths,” he said.

Minister Heng also witnessed the signing of a memorandum of under-

standing between AI Singapore and Element AI, one of the world’s leading applied AI companies. Element AI will help local enterprises to understand and adopt AI more quickly and meaningfully.

The first call for start-up ideas went out last month and the selection process is ongoing. Within three to six months of being selected, and after going through the

venture creation process, the selected teams will be evaluated by a panel for the first tranche of investment of \$50,000.

When the start-up subsequently receives a further external investment or innovation grant, the second tranche of \$50,000 will then be invested by NUS.

NUS provost and senior deputy president Ho Teck Hua said the

scheme will encourage the university’s graduate students and researchers to do translational research that will benefit people.

NUS president Tan Eng Chye said: “We hope to create a strong pipeline of research-based technology companies that will introduce innovative applications and technologies to Singapore and the global markets. Each of these tech-based start-ups would create innovation-based jobs, benefiting the Singapore economy in the long run.”

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