

# START UP EARLY IN TECH

Undergraduates who have created start-ups say the greater support and bigger appetite for tech solutions make it conducive for them to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams



Lester Wong

While most of their undergraduate peers at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD) were still thinking about completing their university education, Mr Aravind Kandiah and Mr Charles Wong were already laying the groundwork for their artificial intelligence (AI) start-up Bifrost.

A month after their graduation in September, the duo's simulation engine had drawn its first customer: rail operator SMRT.

The Bifrost engine creates a virtual world for the simulation of events that are hard to come by in real life.

With SMRT, they are working on a proof-of-concept to train an AI algorithm that helps with safety checks when trains enter or leave the depot. For instance, these can be checks to recognise improbable occurrences such as passenger intrusion or vandalism.

On why they decided to start a business venture while still studying, Mr Aravind, 26, says: "The concept of (being early) – you can change that concept by simply doing it because once you've done it, it's no longer early. We want to be the people who do that."

Mr Wong adds: "We think start-ups are the most efficient way to impact society. We could have joined a multinational corporation or large company where, yes, we might work on big projects. But your effort is often lost in the big machine that is corporate Singapore."

They are among a small but increasing number of student entrepreneurs today taking advantage of Singapore's maturing technology sector.

Not only is there more funding support available, but there is also an increased appetite from customers for technology solutions that can solve real-world problems.

Getting an early start was the logical choice as well for Mr Dylan Teo, 23, a final-year National University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate and co-founder of Telegram food channel Kiasu Foodies, which offers curated food deals.

"Having worked at a start-up before and talking to other founders who have been in the ecosystem for a longer time, one common piece of advice was to start now," he says.

"Because the more you wait, the higher the chances you will have more commitments that are harder to put off to pursue your entrepreneurial dreams."

Mr Teo founded Kiasu Foodies with final-year computer science undergraduate Goh Wei Wen in August last year after they met while on NUS' Overseas College (NOC) Programme in Silicon Valley in the United States.

The channel, which is hosted on popular messaging app Telegram, has more than 120,000 subscribers.

Enterprising undergraduates looking to enter the tech sector today do not lack support from their universities.



The NOC programme is an internship programme where students spend six or 12 months with a tech start-up overseas while also taking entrepreneurship courses at a partner university. It has seen more than 650 start-ups founded by alumni.

NUS students are also able to tap the school's entrepreneurial arm, NUS Enterprise, for mentorship and grants.

NUS Enterprise was founded in 2001. Its Startup SG Founder Grant, for example, matches mentors to start-ups and provides up to \$30,000 for first-time entrepreneurs.

"The landscape now is so much more conducive for somebody who wants to start something compared with five years ago," says Mr Teo.

SUTD provides an incubation space for student start-ups in its entrepreneurship centre, where Mr Aravind and Mr Wong were based before their graduation.

The Nanyang Technological University (NTU) piloted its Overseas Entrepreneurship Programme in 2015 and also offers a \$10,000 grant for students, alumni and faculty members to build early prototypes of their products.

"Encouraging students to found start-ups while still in school sounds very counter-intuitive because most of the good start-ups tend to be created after graduation," says Dr Alex Lin, deputy chief executive officer of NTU's innovation company NTUitive.

"But we want to encourage them to experience (the process) be-

cause this is the only time they are open to learning."

Dr Lin, who was formerly the head of ecosystem development at government-owned venture firm SGInnovate, adds that entrepreneurs are all the more important in an era of technological disruption as they create new jobs.

The tech start-up landscape is also more developed than five to 10 years ago, says Mr Adrian Ang, 30, who founded his first start-up as an NTU engineering undergraduate in 2012.

He is currently running his third start-up, AEvent Health, which offers a wearable monitoring device that gives advance warning of asthma attacks for patients.

He points to the Singapore Week of Innovation & Technology (Switch) as a good example of the tech sector's maturity.

AEvent Health was one of 3,000 investors, start-ups and corporations which took part in the inaugural edition.

More than 60,000 participants turned up last month, when Switch was organised in tandem with the Singapore Fintech Festival.

"In 2016, we saw some (tech companies), but the number of them we saw this year was amazing. There were just so many," says Mr Ang.

"What this means is that there are lots of opportunities for young graduates or even undergraduates to broaden their knowledge, to see things they probably would not have seen compared with 10 years ago."

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## Sharing food deals

Most of the time, finding the right problem to tackle turns out to be more important than having a cutting-edge technology solution.

Just ask National University of Singapore undergraduates Dylan Teo and Goh Wei Wen, who tapped the Telegram messenger app to host Kiasu Foodies, a channel that highlights food deals which might otherwise go unnoticed in Singapore's fragmented food app scene.

Mr Teo, 23, and Mr Goh, 25, are final-year students in business and computer science respectively.

Telegram channels are platforms for the broadcasting of messages to a large audience. Unlike regular chat groups in messaging apps, communication is one-way from the channel owner.

The Kiasu Foodies channel has amassed more than 120,000 subscribers since starting out with an initial 2,000 in August last year.

"Singapore has so many restaurants and food deals, but the pity is that a lot of them go unnoticed," says Mr Teo.

"So we thought, why not create a platform to offer curated food

deals? Telegram made sense to us because it's a good platform to disseminate information to a lot of people."

Kiasu Foodies' business model is simple.

Food apps such as ShopBack, Burpple and Chope offer exclusive deals through Kiasu Foodies, which in turn provides them with advertising.

Kiasu Foodies charges for that advertising, with rates depending on the content of the post.

Mr Teo handles most of the business side of the operations, while Mr Goh is responsible for the tech that powers Kiasu Foodies, such as the programme that trawls the Internet for relevant food deals.

Going forward, the team intends to build a chatbot to make finding food deals easier by providing more personalised service.

"We are targeting a working prototype by the end of the year," says Mr Teo.

"But the chatbot is just a stepping stone. Eventually, we want to go as far as including the most updated promo codes from food delivery services."

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Mr Dylan Teo (left) and Mr Goh Wei Wen, who are studying at the National University of Singapore, co-founded Telegram channel Kiasu Foodies.

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