



SuperFARM principal investigator Toby Fong (far left), 26, and co-investigator Ong Jun Ren, 25, with a poster of their project on a less bulky and more cost-efficient home hydroponics system.
ST PHOTOS: ARIFFIN JAMAR

NUS shortlists 32 ideas so far for post-Covid-19 world

University intends to support 115 projects in all, has set aside \$6m for the programme

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An invitation by the National University of Singapore (NUS) to its recent graduates to come up with fresh ideas for a post-Covid-19 world has seen 32 proposals shortlisted since June.

Applications are still streaming in for the NUS Resilience and Growth Innovation Challenge, for which the university has set aside \$6 million.

The projects fall into three broad categories of making people, society or the world better.

The university intends to support 115 projects in all, a nod to its 115th anniversary this year.

Each project is funded up to \$50,000 for six months, and this grant can be used to pay a stipend of up to \$1,200 per month per project member for the duration of the project.

So far, the ideas that have been approved span from home-based farming and portable science kits for underprivileged children to virtual museums for seniors and eco-friendly carriers for online shopping.

NUS president Tan Eng Chye said: "It is heartening to see youth championing causes that could positively impact the world. As future leaders, the onus is on them to leave their mark for the next generation."

One of the approved projects was pitched by NUS architecture graduate Toby Fong, 26, who is designing a more cost-efficient and less bulky home hydroponics system.

Mr Fong, whose final-year thesis was on the topic of food security, said the panic buying among households earlier this year sparked his interest. Besides being food consumers, "households can also play an active role in ensuring food security", he said.

Mr Fong's architectural knowledge came in handy for the project, known as superFARM, as he considered the space constraints in many Singapore families' homes.

His idea is to start with small crops that can be grown in a stand-alone tray that is about the size of a laptop and can fit up to 11 plants.

He is currently working on a prototype, estimating that each tray unit could cost about \$100, half the price of similar products out there.

His hope is to start people on one tray and slowly work them towards a fuller system that could be the size of a bedside table or bookshelf.

His system also comes with an app that can control crop growth with different factors like humidity, temperature and air flow.

For a start, he has identified nearly 30 crops across three groups – herbs, leafy greens and fruits – more suited to Singapore's climate.

These include basil, oregano, spring onion, chye sim, kangkung and cherry tomatoes.

One tray can harvest 400g of herbs, or 300g to 800g of leafy greens in three to four weeks.

Mr Fong, who started work in August at a local architecture firm but has taken no-pay leave since October for six months, said he



(From left) NUS graduates Ryan Ang, 26; Shradheya Thakre, 22; Shaik Jifridin, 25; and Vivian Ngiam, 23, are four of the five co-founders of With.Network, which matches young people seeking mentors with organisations. The team's pilot run starts next February. They will match 50 students with alumni of NUS Enterprise, the university's entrepreneurship arm.

has seen more interest in gardening in general among households since the circuit breaker period.

"I think this trend will be here to stay," he said.

A group of five NUS graduates has come up with an online mentoring network. Ms Vivian Ngiam, 23, one of the five, said there is currently no centralised platform to match young people seeking mentors with organisations.

"A lot of people would think that LinkedIn is a very good option for professional networking and mentorship," she said. But from a research survey her team conducted, nearly half the students

and fresh graduates felt that LinkedIn was not as useful in connecting them with mentors.

With their idea, With.Network, mentoring stints can be set up on a private online platform unique to each organisation. Students can then apply for these stints and be matched to mentors.

The team's pilot run starts next February; they will match 50 students with alumni of NUS Enterprise, the university's entrepreneurship arm.

They are also working to link students with stints in organisations in the non-profit sector, where many of the mentoring opportuni-

ties may not be visible online, they said.

They also hope to match underprivileged students with mentorship opportunities in future.

Ms Ngiam, a communications and new media graduate whose plan to work overseas was upended by the pandemic, said: "I wanted to make use of my time to do something meaningful with a social cause."

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• For more information, visit <https://farmiture.superfarm.sg/> and <https://www.with-network.com/>