

Alibaba Group opens first joint research institute outside China with NTU to study AI



The five-year partnership was marked by a signed memorandum of understanding at NTU. The Alibaba-NTU Singapore Joint Research Institute will be based on campus. PHOTO: REUTERS

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SINGAPORE - A new institute that will look into how artificial intelligence (AI) can help improve the delivery of services, such as healthcare and city planning, was launched on Wednesday (Feb 28).

It marks the start of a partnership between Chinese technology giant Alibaba Group and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

The collaboration will be worth millions of dollars a year, and will involve 50 researchers from both organisations.

Examples of real-world situations the institute expects to delve into include the diagnosis or prevention of diseases such as arthritis and tuberculosis, said Alibaba chief technology officer Jeff Zhang.

Mr Zhang added that the lab could use AI technology to record and analyse people's daily activities at home or in nursing homes, which could then help detect and predict problems.

The five-year partnership was marked by a signed memorandum of understanding at NTU.

The Alibaba-NTU Singapore Joint Research Institute will be based on campus.

The laboratory is said to be the largest investment to NTU from a company to date, though both the university and Alibaba declined to reveal the total cost.

Alibaba will tap NTU's AI expertise to further push the boundaries of the company's existing technologies, which include natural language processing, machine learning and cloud computing.

Natural language processing is an area of artificial intelligence that deals with the interpretation of everyday human speech by technology.

Machine learning involves the development of computer programs that can learn on their own by making sense of vast amounts of data.

Cloud computing is the delivery of computer services and applications over networks.

Mr Zhang said Singapore provides a natural base for the company's research efforts, especially in the fields of natural language processing and speech analysis.

This is because the country is Alibaba's regional base in South-east Asia, has a strong research tradition and a multilingual population.

Ms Liu Xiangwen, director of Alibaba's technology strategy department, said: "Our partnership with NTU demonstrates the close alignment of Alibaba's strategic vision with Singapore's Smart Nation initiative to leverage technology for the good of the community."

Professor Lam Khin Yong, NTU's vice-president of research, said: "Our research expertise will complement Alibaba's extensive business and technological experience to tackle challenging problems in their business ecosystem."

Senior Minister of State for the Environment and Water Resources and Ministry of Health, Dr Amy Khor, was the guest of honour at the event.

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