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Aim is to help them avoid the ‘valley of death’ and make the jump to market

Osmond Chia

Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and major venture capital firm Walden International have kick-started a \$50 million fund to support deep-tech start-ups making the leap from the laboratory to the market.

The Nanyang Frontier Fund will be allocated to NTU projects in the deep-tech space, including those in artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and high-end engineering.

Walden International chairman Tan Lip-Bu and his associates have invested \$5 million to launch the fund, with NTU allocating another \$5 million, said the university in an announcement on Nov 4.

Investors are invited to contribute to the fund. NTU did not give an estimate date for when the \$50 million goal would be achieved.

Start-ups often struggle to commercialise due to insufficient funding, especially given the long duration for research and the risk associated with deep-tech projects, said Professor Louis Phee, NTU vice-president of innovation and entrepreneurship, in his opening address at the launch event at NTU on Nov 4.

“Many of the deep-tech innovations developed at NTU require extensive research and development, and long development cycles before they are ready to scale and succeed in the marketplace,” he said.

Without funding to bridge the gap to commercialisation, many deep-tech start-ups risk being unable to transition from the lab to the market, said Prof Phee.

“In the bigger picture, this means missing the opportunity to address pressing global challenges and creating the socio-economic impact these technologies are capable of,” he added, noting that the fund aims to provide support for start-ups to navigate this critical stage.

Deputy Prime Minister Heng



Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat taking a tour of Nanyang Technology University (NTU) spin-off companies on Nov 4. He said NTU's partnership with Walden International can help start-ups gain valuable market insights and networking opportunities. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Swee Keat said at the launch that the partnership with Walden International – an established name in the United States and Asia – can help start-ups gain valuable market insights and networking opportunities, which are essential to growing their research and business capabilities.

“Both are equally important in navigating the start-up journey and avoiding the ‘valley of death,’” said DPM Heng, referring to the early challenge in a start-up’s life-cycle when it lacks funding to reach commercialisation.

He said the Frontier Fund adds to a growing list of platforms to support spin-offs from research institutes, including the \$50 million National Graduate Research Innovation Programme managed by

NTU and the National University of Singapore (NUS) to train start-up founders and researchers to discover business ventures for research.

Similarly, NUS’ Block71 initiative supports more than 100 start-ups, by sharing its premises and offering global networking opportunities in the tech sector.

DPM Heng thanked Mr Tan from Walden International for launching the fund, which will channel a quarter of its profits back to NTU to support future start-ups.

Mr Tan, a prominent figure in venture capital, has an extensive network of partners and industry connections built over a lucrative investment career, during which he has helped raise billions in funding across various tech sec-

tors, including semiconductors and AI.

Mr Tan, a student at Nanyang University – which preceded NTU – in the 1970s, said he intends to identify start-ups from the university that can be nurtured to become Singapore-based global companies. On how he assesses start-ups, Mr Tan told the media that he looks for promising teams that address a real problem in society, which customers will pay for.

He added that he has a keen interest in tech related to generative AI. The technology is “bigger than the internet” with the potential to affect all aspects of life, said Mr Tan, adding that he is looking into projects developing AI applications that cater to the needs of each domain.

Start-ups supported by NTU, which has backed over 400 spin-offs, including 120 deep-tech ventures, in the past decade, will look eagerly to the fund for support. Together, these ventures are worth more than \$1 billion, according to Prof Phee.

Among the start-ups likely to tap the Frontier Fund is Zero-Error Systems (ZES), a spin-off from NTU’s Lean Launchpad that is keen to expand its business.

ZES chief executive Rajan Rajgopal said the start-up, which is backed by the likes of Airbus’ investment arm to develop radiation-resistant computer chips to be used in satellites, is raising more funds to expand its products.

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