

Optics centre will help firms with research

By RACHEL SCULLY

A NEW \$30 million research facility for optics and lasers that opened at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) yesterday holds plenty of promise for Singapore's smaller firms.

The Centre for Optical and Laser Engineering (Cole) will be a one-stop shop, conducting research in areas relevant to companies mostly in the engineering field.

It will allow such firms to tap into cutting-edge innovation without having to undergo the pricey option of setting up their own research premises.

The facility is housed at NTU's School of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering but is also supported and funded by the Economic Development Board (EDB).

NTU has spent the past year bringing in equipment, recruiting researchers and attracting PhD students to Cole before its official launch yesterday.

It hopes to complete 10 short-term industry collaborations involving instruments used in optical engineering in the next three years.

Two of its current collaborations are 3D-imaging for diseases like glaucoma and instruments that accurately detect vibration signals on aircraft and cars.

Small and medium-sized enterprises will have to pay an annual membership fee of at least \$1,000 to consult and procure the services of the centre's researchers and PhD students.

If a new or improved product emerges, they will then pay – likely a five-figure sum – to buy or share in the new innovation.

NTU provost Freddy Boey told the launch ceremony yesterday that it had secured \$10 million in research and industry funding.

Professor Boey said: "Cole will focus on high-value manufacturing solutions targeted at the industry and will bring about greater efficiency, as well as new commercial applications.

"It is fuelled by the increasing needs of the precision-engineering industry to enhance its growth and productivity."

EDB assistant managing director Alvin Tan said: "Many top optics and lasers companies have established regional headquarters, (research and development) and manufacturing activities in Singapore to serve their customers regionally and globally.

He added that Cole will serve as a platform to train more people in the specialised engineering field while helping companies with their research projects.

However, Professor Asundi Anand, Cole's director, noted that the centre's ability to attract more industry partners has been hampered by the companies' concerns over the intellectual property of prototypes and improvements that the facility develops.

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