STARTING EASILY IN TECH

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 Aravinth Kandhal and Mr Charles Wong were already laying the groundwork for their artificial intelligence (AI) start-up, BIovest.

A month after their graduation in September, the duo’s simulation engine had drawn in first customer sales from a reception in Kampong Glam.

The BIovest engine creates a virtual world for the simulation of events that are hard to come by in real life. With SERTI, 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-vandalism.

On why they decided to start a business venture while still studying, Mr Aravinth, 26, says: “The concept of (being early) — you can change that concept by simply doing it before once you’ve done it, it’s no longer early. We want to be the people who dares.”

Mr Wong adds: “We think start-ups are the most efficient way to impact society. We could have joined a multinational corporation or a large company where, you know, we might work on bigger projects, but our effort is to be in the machine that is corporate Singapore.”

They are among a small but increasing number of student entrepreneurs today taking advantage of Singapore’s nurturing tech sector.

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

Getting to such a start was the logical choice as well for Mr Neo Tian, 23, a first-year National University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate and co-founder of Telegram food channel Kiaka Foods, 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 if you wait, the higher the chances you will have more competition. And then it’s harder to put off to pursue your entrepreneurial dreams.”

Mr Neo founded Kiaka Foods with final-year computer science undergraduate Goh Wei Wen in August last year after they met while on NUS Overseas College (OC) Programme in Silicon Valley in the United States.

The channel, which is hosted on popular messaging app Telegram, has more than 20,000 subscribers.

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

The NUS 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 630 start-ups funded in its alumni.

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

NUS Enterprise was founded in 2008. Its Startup Founders 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 to five years ago,” says Mr Tan.

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

The Nanyang Technological University (NTU) piloted its Overseas Entrepreneurship Programme in 2015 and also offers a $30,000 grant for students, alumni and faculty members to build early prototypes of their products.

“Encouraging students to find 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 Lim, deputy chief executive officer of NTU’s innovation company NTU355.

“But we want to encourage them to experience (the process) before 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 ScInnovate, 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 at an NTU engineering undergraduate in 2012.

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

He points to the Singapore Week of Innovation & Technology (Swich) as a good example of the tech sector’s maturity. Algise Health was one of 3,000 investors, start-ups and corporates which took part in the 10-day festival.

More than 60,000 participants tuned up last month, which was organised in tandem with the Singapore Fintech Festival.

In 2016, we saw some tech companies, but the number of them this year was amazing, there were four to five,” says Mr Ang.

“This means that there are lots of opportunities for young grad and even undergraduates to broaden their knowledge, to see things they probably would not have seen compared to four or five years ago.”

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