

New SUSS hub to develop ideas to help the elderly

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Having companion robots for senior citizens is among the ideas to be explored by a new centre that aims to tackle issues faced by an ageing population.

The Ngee Ann Kongsi Social Impact Hub set up by the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) will help students to develop new technology, programmes and social enterprises to support the elderly.

The hub was launched yesterday and is supported by a \$10 million donation from non-profit organisation The Ngee Ann Kongsi, which will disburse \$2 million annually over five years.

By 2035, about one-third of Singapore's population will be 65 years old and above as more people live longer and birth rates remain low.

The money from the donation will support entrepreneurship programmes such as the Social Impact Incubator, which provides young and mid-career SUSS students with funding and mentorship to develop ideas and innovations that help Singapore's elderly.

Speaking at the launch event, Minister for National Development Desmond Lee said: "In the longer term, the hub can also nurture a pipeline of entrepreneurs who contribute to the social enterprise ecosystem and the silver economy."

He said many efforts are ongoing by different agencies and community partners to transform social service delivery, but Singapore needs a more integrated approach to support the vulnerable.

Through the hub, SUSS students can explore innovations such as companion robots or bathing devices to help Singapore's seniors.

The Lovot, a companion robot developed in Japan, is being trialled in nursing homes such as Orange Valley to see how it can benefit the elderly. The Lovot has sensors that make it responsive to touch, and heating features so that it is warm to the touch.

The hub will provide funding to bring in more Lovots for trials. Details are still being worked out.

SUSS president Cheong Hee Kiat said the hub will help to build a growing ecosystem of like-minded students, social entrepreneurs and business communities to create new ideas and solutions.

He said the question of how to engage wider communities and young people needs to be asked when looking at improving elder-care services.

"How can we nurture a spirit of entrepreneurship among our young and mid-career students, who are then empowered to innovate products and services that address the needs of our wider communities to make a positive impact on society?"

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