

NUS' budding entrepreneurs resume overseas internships

They are among first NUS students to do stints abroad since pandemic began

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National University of Singapore (NUS) students Augustine Chia and Alvin Tay were part of a seven-member team that came up with an idea for a 3D-printed customised mask for children suffering from sleep apnea.

The continuous positive airway pressure mask went on to win two awards, including the James Dyson national award last year.

The two biomedical engineering students, who are passionate about medical technology solutions to help people, and their teammates are keen to improve the product and take it to market.

Realising they needed to learn more about product development, marketing and securing investors, they signed up for the NUS Overseas Colleges (NOC) programme in January this year despite being told it would be conducted online.

Under the programme, which aims to nurture entrepreneurs, they went on to work with start-ups in Stockholm, a city known for its medical technology start-ups.

Before Covid-19, about 300 students would head out yearly to different business nodes in the world, including Silicon Valley, New York City, Stockholm and Israel, to work in start-ups and take up courses in partner universities.

Last week, Mr Chia and Mr Tay, both 24, flew to Stockholm with three other students to work with



the firms they had been interning with remotely. They are among the first NUS students to resume student exchanges and internships since March last year, when several hundred NUS students overseas were asked to return home amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

NOC officials said about 80 students will leave over the next four months for Silicon Valley, New York, Stockholm, Munich and Toronto as part of the programme.

Professor Chee Yeow Meng, associate vice-president of innovation and enterprise at NUS and director of NOC, said the programme has been an influential force behind start-ups here, including two unicorns – PatSnap and Carousell – which refer to start-ups valued at

over US\$1 billion.

That is why NUS felt it was important to keep the programme going despite the travel disruptions brought on by Covid-19. The NOC team replicated as much of the overseas experience as possible.

Said Prof Chee: “But we also asked ourselves whether we can still keep to the purpose and rigour of the programme, operating in pandemic mode.

“By having students do remote internships for start-ups in NOC locations, and for them to have access to the same slate of mentors and coaches in those locations as before, we found we can achieve the same purpose and rigour.”

But Prof Chee added that NUS switched back to overseas attach-

ments as soon as it became possible for students to travel again.

“We recognise there are some elements of overseas experience that cannot be replicated. Being in a new place drives a spirit of adventure and curiosity. If we can provide this experience, even for a few months, we should do so.”

Mr Chia, who will continue his internship as a business development associate in a medical tech company in Stockholm, said: “Despite working online and in a different time zone, they kept me busy and I learnt a lot. But it’s nothing like being in the same office as your colleagues – it will be a much more intense working environment and I am sure I will learn so much more.”

UNIQUE EXPERIENCE

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National University of Singapore students Augustine Chia (far left) and Alvin Tay, who are interning in Stockholm, with a mask for children with sleep apnea they helped come up with. PHOTO: AUGUSTINE CHIA

NUS officials said various measures have been put in place to ensure the safety of the students. Besides allowing only vaccinated students to travel, NUS said it will monitor their health and wellness, and will not hesitate to bring them home if the situation warrants it.

Despite the pandemic causing major disruptions, Prof Chee said it has also spurred entrepreneurs to come up with bold, new ideas.

He added: “Something happens to our students when they head overseas – they come back bubbling with ideas and, more importantly, the derring-do, know-how and confidence to turn these ideas into products.”

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