

Start-up behind sign language chatbot among 7 to get funding

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Public transport users from the deaf community will soon be able to get help with directions at Chinatown MRT station from a chatbot that communicates in sign language.

Singapore start-up FingerDance is deploying Silvia – or Sign Language Virtual Assistant – at a kiosk in the station, in a collaboration with SBS Transit.

In response to queries that are typed or spoken, it will provide real-time answers in text and sign language. Queries cannot be made via sign language.

Silvia is trained to answer questions most frequently asked by commuters, such as where the nearest bus stop is. It will also translate all MRT announcements into sign language.

“It’s just like ChatGPT... if ChatGPT had the capacity for sign language as well,” said FingerDance co-founder Gong He.

FingerDance is one of seven local start-ups that received funding from a new Technology for Sustainable Social Impact (TS2) accelerator programme established by NUS Enterprise and the Singapore Centre for Social Enterprise, which committed \$3.5 million to growing tech-based social enterprise start-ups.

The programme provides support for such early- and growth-stage start-ups that use technology to try to solve community issues in Singapore.

On July 25, the seven start-ups presented their products to industry experts and venture capital firms at the TS2 Demo Day.

“The TS2 accelerator programme was birthed from a vision to nurture the next generation of social impact entrepreneurs, who leverage technology as the cornerstone for businesses that are both purpose-driven and financially sustainable,” said National University of Singapore deputy president Chen Tsuhan.

The programme will nurture 16 start-ups over two years, with the second batch of start-ups to be announced in 2025. Each of them will receive grant funding of up to \$95,000, as well as access to mentors, investors and impact professionals to help scale their businesses and amplify their social impact.

The programme will have a structured curriculum and a development plan tailored to the needs of each start-up.

Aside from FingerDance, the inaugural batch of start-ups also includes Tech Up Advance, an education solutions provider that aims to help students better understand and develop an interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem).

Through mini-games on the GoTechUp website, students will explore basic concepts of robotics to connect what they learn in classrooms with real life.

Tech Up Advance co-founder and chief financial officer Sulfya Lim said a Primary 5 pupil once asked her why he had to learn about angles when all he wanted was to draw comics. “His simple question exposed a massive disconnect between what we teach versus what’s needed for the future,” she said.

In one mini-game, students are tasked to collect potions and drive a car into a portal. To get the car moving, they have to drag and drop a sequence of instructions that control the speed and tyre direction.

Tech Up Advance co-founder and chief executive Ainaa Rosli said that GoTechUp should not replace but, rather, be used to supplement each school’s main curriculum.

While the start-up currently recommends mini-games based on the school’s curriculum, teachers should eventually be comfortable enough to pick and choose the mini-game to suit their lesson plans.

“Ultimately, if (students) start having a good fundamental Stem (understanding), they will have a lot more opportunities and options,” Ms Ainaa said.

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