

Causes Week: Youth advocates seeking change

Turning A-grade school paper into recycling drive



NTU undergraduates (main picture, from left) Ang Wei Loong, Wong Song Wei and Lek Zhi Yu created an app (left) that uses a points system to encourage people to recycle. They also started a company, Surf, to run recycling drives in firms. ST PHOTOS: ARIFFIN JAMAR

3 NTU undergrads build app to coax users to reuse waste



Cara Wong

It started as a school paper on local waste management that earned three Nanyang Technological University (NTU) undergraduates an A grade last year.

But it didn't end there as the trio saw real-life potential in it. In less than a year, the engineering students, who are all in their final year, had produced a Web application that taught consumers how to recycle and promised incentives when they did.

Said co-developer Lek Zhi Yu: "It's very cliched, but we just wanted to save the environment."

In the course of research for their paper, they discovered that Singapore's recycling rates were far lower than that of many First World countries.

In South Korea, for instance, more than 50 per cent of domestic waste is recycled, compared with 21 per cent here last year.

"We felt we could do something

CHANGING THE CULTURE HERE

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CO-DEVELOPER ANG WEILOONG

about it," said Mr Lek, 24. As an exchange student in South Korea in 2016, he saw how residents travelled miles just to take their neatly packaged recyclables to a recycling bin.

"In Singapore, all we do is dump it in the blue recycling bin, but I think

about half of the items can't be recycled because they're contaminated by being wet or dirty," he said.

Fellow co-developer Ang Wei Loong, 25, feels it is a cultural problem. "People think it's a hassle to recycle because they have to sort or clean the recyclable materials... We want to change the recycling culture here."

The three decided to ride the gaming trend, using a Web application with a points system that would give people incentives to recycle.

For now, its competition format is best used by companies which wish to run environmental campaigns in the workplace.

Employees accumulate "points" for every real bag of recyclables they contribute. These are collected and processed by the team, who will analyse their contributions and leave feedback on how appropriate their contributions are.

Each user can also track the amount they recycle through the app. The user with the highest points gets a prize, which is paid for

by their employer.

The team built the app using a \$10,000 grant from NTU's innovation and enterprise arm, and charges companies a sum for running the programme in workplaces.

Since their company, Surf, was incorporated in March, the students have run campaigns at four companies, both multinational and small home-grown firms. The firms could not comment by press time.

The trio believe the app's biggest advantage is the educational aspect.

The third co-developer, Mr Wong Song Wei, 25, said: "We hope that through incentivising them to recycle, and by allowing them to track their contributions, it can encourage them to recycle more."

"We have limited landfill space, so we need to make sure that our future generations will still have space to grow."

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SCANTO WATCH

How the Surf team processes recyclables <http://str.sg/surf>

