

# Alibaba, NTU set up joint AI research institute in S'pore

By ANGELA TENG



(From right to left) Prof Lam Khin Yong, NTU Vice President (Research), Prof Subra Suresh, NTU President; Dr Amy Khor, Senior Minister of State for the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources and Ministry of Health, Singapore; Mr Jeff Zhang, Alibaba Group CTO; and Ms Liu Xiangwen, Director, Technology Strategy Department at Alibaba Group; launching the new Joint Research Institute. Photo: NTU Singapore

---

*Published* **28 FEBRUARY, 2018**

**UPDATED 28 FEBRUARY, 2018**



---

SINGAPORE — Nanyang Technological University and Chinese Internet giant Alibaba launched a joint research institute on Wednesday (Feb 28) focusing on artificial intelligence (AI).

With millions in funding per year under the five-year partnership - the parties declined to disclose the exact amount — this is Alibaba’s first joint research facility outside of China, as well as the university’s largest partnership with the private sector on AI.

The collaboration will start with 50 researchers from both organisations, with the aim of combining NTU’s AI technology — which has been applied to areas such as health, ageing, homes and communities — with Alibaba’s

capabilities such as computer vision, machine learning and cloud computing.

The tie-up seeks to “explore further technology breakthroughs and real-life AI solutions,” said NTU and Alibaba in a joint statement. The target is to deploy AI solutions to homes, retail, community and urban transportation to hospitals and nursing homes, over the next five years, the organisations added.

Going forward, researchers from both Alibaba and NTU will work jointly on AI applications in a wide range of areas, said Alibaba Group chief technology officer Jeff Zhang.

For example, the technologies from both organisations can be leveraged to record and analyse the daily activities of people at home or the elderly at nursing homes. This can then help detect or

predict problems, as well as provide AI companions and assistance.

Alibaba has implemented a “medical brain” in hospitals to expedite the diagnosis or prevention of diseases including tuberculosis and arthritis. Together with NTU’s research in the healthcare sector, the partnership could lead to breakthroughs, the organisations said.

At the launch, Dr Amy Khor, Senior Minister of State (Health and Environment and Water Resources), noted that Alibaba has been making waves globally for its digital inventions, such as the “medical brain”.

Potential collaborations between the NTU-Alibaba institute — located on the university campus — with existing research centres such as the NTU LILY Research Centre, which has developed

AI-empowered ageing technologies, will also “no doubt invigorate the healthcare sector”, Dr Khor said.

NTU president Subra Suresh said the partnership was a result of talks with Alibaba lasting about two years.

“Alibaba is well aware of NTU’s leadership role in the areas of data science and artificial intelligence. So this is a natural fit,” he said.

Mr Zhang said the collaboration is part of the research and development efforts of Alibaba’s DAMO academy, which was launched last October. Alibaba’s contribution to the tie-up will be coming from the US\$15-billion fund earmarked for the Alibaba DAMO academy programme.

The company chose NTU because of its “very solid technology research background”, he added. He noted that

there will be opportunities for NTU students, staff and faculty to go on exchange to Alibaba's facilities and vice versa.

With Singapore as Alibaba's base in Southeast Asia, Mr Zhang said the company is providing e-commerce, cloud computing and payment solutions to "empower customers in various industries" in the region.