

Alibaba sets up first joint research institute outside China with Singapore's NTU to delve into AI

South China Morning Post

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South China Morning Post 28 February 2018



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China's Alibaba Group set up its first overseas joint research institute in Singapore, partnering with Nanyang Technological University to develop artificial intelligence for use in tackling issues from ageing societies to urban transport.

The Alibaba-NTU Singapore Joint Research Institute will start with a pool of 50 researchers from both organisations, according to a joint statement. The institute will combine NTU's human-centred AI technology with Alibaba's research on natural language processing, machine learning, cloud computing and more, for AI solutions that helps improve the city's efficiency and people's lives.

"Using AI technologies, we can address fundamental societal challenges such as ageing population which is a huge issue for cities with a rapidly ageing population such as Singapore," Professor Subra Suresh, President of NTU, said in the statement.

China's tech companies are investing in artificial intelligence research as part of a national strategy to make the country an innovation centre for the technology by 2030.

Students and academics from NTU will have the opportunity of an exchange with Alibaba as they work on the AI research and vice versa. The AI solutions developed by the institute will be tested on the NTU campus before rolling out in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

NTU ranked as the top university for citations in AI-related research papers in a list compiled by Nikkei and Elsevier last year, ahead of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Singapore was ranked second in another 2017 Elsevier report regarding impact of AI research, behind Switzerland.

Singapore's talent pool and the government's drive on AI technology makes the country an ideal place for Alibaba's first overseas AI research institute, according to Alibaba chief technology officer Jeff Zhang.

Singapore's multi-language environment will also be "extremely valuable" in speech analysis and natural language processing research, he said.

Alibaba's investment will come from the Alibaba Discovery, Adventure, Momentum and Outlook (Damo) Academy, its \$15 billion research and development fund open to researchers across the world. Singapore will house one of the seven research labs under the Damo programme established in 2017.

Besides the initial 50 researchers, the institute plans to attract talent from across the world as the programme expands in the coming years.

"Our collaboration with NTU is just the beginning – down the road, this joint research institute will be open to participation to researchers worldwide towards the goal of building an AI-focused research community," said Zhang.

The group set up the Institute of Data Science and Technologies (iDST) in Silicon Valley in 2014 for fundamental AI research.

Alibaba also established its AI Labs in 2016 as part of the company's push into consumer AI technology, led by chief scientist Wang Gang, formerly an associate professor at NTU.

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