



Above: The team at Techsailor — (clockwise from centre) Nanyang Polytechnic graduate Cheng Shun Ling (Singaporean), NUS graduates Wayne Chia (Malaysian), Rex Huang (Chinese national), Leon Leong (Singaporean) and Nguyen Khanh An (Vietnamese).
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Right: Socialico founders and SMU graduates Keith Ng (left) from Singapore and Damon Widjaja from Indonesia.
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Tying up with foreigners is a plus, say local grads who have done so

More opportunities to venture overseas; strengths to complement one another

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SINGAPORE — Some Singaporean graduates building local start-ups have found that a good first step is to give it an international flavour — by forging business partnerships with friends of various nationalities they have met on campus.

Those whom MediaCorp spoke to say they are starting to see more of such local-foreign tie-ups.

Take, for instance, National University of Singapore alumnus Leon Leong, 28, whose business team comprises a Vietnamese, a Malaysian, a Chinese and another Singaporean.

"Because of the diversity our team has, we're able to tap into overseas markets that we'd never be able to do alone," said Mr Leong, whose five-year-old company Techsailor focuses on social marketing strategies and has branched out to China and Malaysia.

He added that the different backgrounds and cultures of his team members have benefited the company.

His business partner, Mr Nguyen Khanh An, 27, agrees and feels that he has learnt much by working with team members who have had more overseas exposure.

The Vietnamese, who had to serve a three-year bond working in Singapore after completing his studies at the NUS, said that a start-up allowed him to have "more freedom" to execute his ideas.

Initially, there was a "cloud of uncertainty", admitted Mr Leong, who acts as the sales and marketing director. His advice is to "keep an open mindset, accept differences of culture and be more tolerant".

Mr Ngyuen, whose role is IT director, added: "You'll not be comfortable with every single foreign student but you'll eventually find the right people to work with."

Dr Lily Chan, chief executive of NUS Enterprise, believes that local-foreign graduate tie-ups are a natural trend due to more foreign students. "This is a good trend, as it means these young start-ups will have a more international outlook from Day One," she said.

Some of these graduates are able to tap on incubator funding. This was the case for Mr Leong's team.

Singapore Management University alumni Keith Ng, 28, and Damon Widjaja, 27, also founded a business last year with funds from the Media Development Authority and incubated at the SMU. Their company, Socialico, develops digital platforms and games.

Mr Ng said the key to such tie-ups lies in establishing company norms from the start, which could differ across cultures, he said.

Professor Desai Narasimhalu, director of the Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at SMU, said while more students are embarking on business ventures, it is still too early to tell whether foreign and local partnerships are a trend.