Helping hand for budding entrepreneurs

By MATTHEW PHAN

ASPIRING student entrepreneurs got a helping hand from established business leaders yesterday, as they tossed around ideas such as a virtual bank with products like interest-bearing deposits for online game money.

The mentoring session involved 10 leaders, including Philip Ng, CEO of Far East Organization and Sat Pal Khattar, senior partner of Khattar Holdings, as well as 29 local participants in the Lee Kuan Yew Global Business Plan competition this year.

HSBC co-organised the session with the Singapore Management University, roping in senior leaders from among its customers and associates to share their experience with the students.

Each leader was allotted three teams and given their business plans to read in advance. Each of the teams then had about 15 minutes to discuss their plans and receive feedback.

The leaders were understanding about the youthfulness of the students, but judging from the few teams that BT observed, they pulled few punches.

"They have a good product and have identified their market, but they need to work out the mechanics of the business,” Angelo Augustus, executive director of Pertama Holdings, said of a team that wanted to sell crocodile skin jewelery.

He asked them whether they intended to sell their high-end product directly to female consumers or through a retailer, but the team did not have a definite answer. Mr Augustus told them: "Nobody out there knows that ring exists, unless they walk into a retailer and see it.”

To a team that wanted to sell healthy fast food, Mr Ng of Far East counselled them to focus on finding a workable recipe and a popular location, instead of getting caught up in the mechanics of how to operate their planned conveyor belt system.

"Think like a retailer. You need to get good locations. Without good spots, you have no traffic,” he told them.

Mr Khattar praised Chip-Inside Systems, a team of third year engineers from Nanyang Technological University who want to embed microchips into electronic devices to prove their authenticity.

The team said Mr Khattar’s main insight had been to look at the project from an investor’s point of view, and to reconsider their pricing strategy.

HSBC also launched a $100,000 Youth Enterprise Fund, to be made available to the winning or best performing local team in the LKY competition, on top of the US$20,000 prize money from the contest itself.