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NRF announces S\$150m investment in fourth research excellence centre

By S Ramesh, Channel NewsAsia | Posted: 20 February 2009 19:32 hrs

SINGAPORE: Despite the economic downturn, Singapore is investing S\$150m in its fourth research centre of excellence in efforts to keep the economy competitive.

The National Research Foundation (NRF) and the Ministry of Education announced on Friday that S\$150m will be spent over 10 years to support the Research Centre of Excellence in Mechanobiology.

The centre will be set up at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Mechanobiology deals with cell and tissue mechanics in developing therapies.

Its research results are expected to influence the development of specific drugs and highly accurate treatment of heart diseases, cancer and other ailments due to ageing.

The NRF emphasised that Singapore's investments in the research centres of excellence are for the long term and that these investments are important.

That is because with emerging markets like China and India also playing equal attention to research and development, it is important for Singapore to differentiate itself in specialised areas of research.

The new Research Centre of Excellence in Mechanobiology will have about 120 researchers and staff.



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NUS president, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, said: "This centre has started working closely with the Cancer RCE (Research Centre of Excellence) and the physicians in the National University Health System as well as other hospitals in Singapore.

"So we see these synergies to bring about very interesting discoveries which I think in the long term will help us to think of new solutions for our patients."

Another S\$40m is being set aside for collaboration with two top Israeli universities - the Technion Israeli Institute of Technology and the Weizmann Institute of Science.

The collaboration is the result of a meeting of scientists and NRF officials from both countries.

Weizmann Institute of Science's Professor Benjamin Geiger said: "We also understood that the expertise, knowledge of people in Weizmann and Singapore were very, very complementary.

"We also realised that Singapore, being able to make major investments in big genetic screens, was an excellent place to try generate research to target drug therapies."

So with the current economic downturn, are these investments in R&D useful expenses?

NRF chairman, Dr Tony Tan, said: "What we are funding in the RCE and the two Israeli projects are investments which will not pay off immediately.

"But we hope that by building up these scientific and technical capabilities, we will strengthen the whole infrastructure of scientific research and train up a pool of people who are well versed in the leading edge of very important fields.

"If we do this over a period of time, then we will be able to build up Singapore as a hub for scientific R&D. And we have to do this in Singapore - we are a small country.

"With China and India becoming more prominent in the international field commercially, Singapore has to differentiate itself, and the way in which Singapore can differentiate itself is to make these long-term investments."

And that will help turn Singapore into a hotbed for innovation and enterprise.

- CNA/ir

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