



ACE POSITION PAPER

Creating a Future-Ready Startup Ecosystem

JANUARY 2022

in collaboration with



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Chairman's Message

This Position Paper marks a watershed moment for ACE and an exciting opportunity for Singapore's startup ecosystem. Through a series of extensive surveys and in-depth focus groups that spanned six months, we have collated the latest ground sentiments from prominent Singapore-based startup founders, venture capitalists, and Government stakeholders.

After subsequent analysis, in collaboration with our knowledge partner - PwC Singapore's Venture Hub team, and our Steering Committee, we are eager to share with you our findings. Our hardworking team has identified the hurdles that prevent our startup ecosystem from reaching its full potential, pinpointed new opportunities, and designed actionable strategies that can help the ecosystem reach new heights.

Our ultimate goal is to provide our startup ecosystem with the tailwind it needs to open new doors and accelerate Singapore's economic recovery. This Position Paper highlights three essential building blocks for a future-ready startup ecosystem:

- **Improving Market Access**
- **Realising Talent Opportunities**
- **Accelerating Funding**

While the direction is clear, there is indeed much work ahead of us. As the nation's startup trade association, ACE is determined to do its utmost to uplift our startup community and work with you to support this essential economic ecosystem.

The Singapore Government has always been a testament to the success of our nation's startup ecosystem and played a pivotal role in activating the potential that exists today. We advocate that with ongoing collaboration and joint concerted efforts we can propel our ecosystem even further.

More than ever, the team at ACE is motivated to achieve a greater sense of duty and unity across the board and we will continue to promote the best interests of our members and keep an eye out for new growth opportunities. With your support, we believe our startup ecosystem can achieve more on the competitive global stage.

So, here's to expanding our horizons and cementing our position as THE top innovation hub and startup ecosystem not only in Asia, but the rest of the world!

The best years have yet to come.



James Tan
Chairman, Board of Directors
Action Community for Entrepreneurship



Executive Summary

If Singapore's success story has taught us anything, it's that size should not be a limiting factor for success. Poetically, local startups have a lot in common with their host nation. Startups pull more than five times their weight, with tech startups contributing to 2.40% of Singapore's GDP despite accounting for just 0.57% of the employed population.

The success of our startup ecosystem should therefore encourage, but not prevent us from dreaming larger. As an international business hub and bridge between the East and the West, opportunities and resources for reaching greater heights are aplenty. We hope to see even more Singaporean startups take off with confidence and agility, provide their industry leaders with new and innovative ideas, or even cement their position as powerhouses in their own right. The ingredients for success are already there, all that's left is to kickstart the ignition.

Unfortunately, limits to talent, market access, and funding have proved to be the cause of some stagnation, plateaus, and even closures of potential unicorns with high-value ideas. Often, the issue does not lie with the availability of these resources, but ensuring that things are in the right place at the right time.

Improving Market Access

Compounding startups' woes is the issue of market access. Budding entrepreneurs often regard Singapore as an accessible starting point to the Southeast Asian market, but lately, regional headquarters on local soil has had a hard time justifying their namesake. New complexities introduced by the pandemic and border controls have also limited expansion opportunities, robbing Singapore of much of its former lustre.

Realising Talent Opportunities

When it comes to talent, it doesn't matter how brilliant our ideas are, fulfilling them without help from the right people is near impossible. It takes more than just throwing money at the problem, too. Startups tend to lose out on attractive hires because they cannot offer as much as larger corporations. So, to achieve a sustainable flow of talent it will require a concerted effort from institutes of higher learning, governing bodies, and even larger corporations.

Accelerating Funding

Startups deal with these situations, and more, while running on a financial timebomb. Funding availability determines how long startups can hold out. Often, things boil down to a matter of buying just enough time to execute ideas, or missing out and burying their entrepreneurial dreams altogether.

The challenges are great but getting bogged down and discouraged has never been part of Singapore's dictionary. On the contrary, Singapore relishes a good challenge and inside this Position Paper we provide actionable strategies to assist the Government to overcome these woes.

After all, obstacles only allow us to rise mightier than before, just as we did post-independence. Success stories of local unicorns have kept the startup spirit burning thus far, but our ambition is to keep our flame burning brighter and stronger. To do that we need to ensure that deserving businesses do not flicker out due to unfortunate happenstance.

Because when you think like a startup, like a Singaporean, you'll find opportunity in adversity.



A Snapshot of Singapore's Thriving Startup Ecosystem

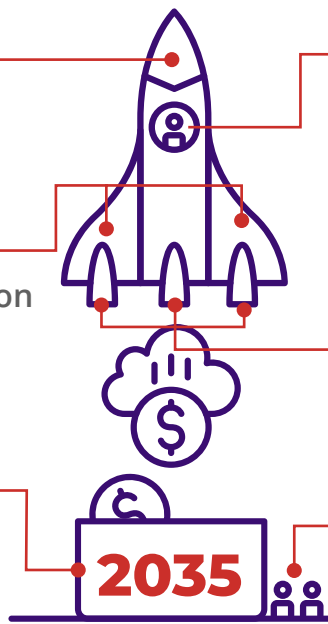
Sitting at the gateway to Southeast Asia, Singapore is well-known as a startup incubator and our startup ecosystem is internationally acclaimed for its thriving status. Here are the highlights from Singapore's startup ecosystem 2021 report card.

Numbers to be proud of:

+3,800
startups
exist in Singapore¹

~0.57%
of the total employed population
in 2020 are from startups²

\$S\$15.4 billion
in value-added wages and
profits are expected from
Singapore's startups by 2035



+20,000
people are employed
by startups

2.40%
the estimated contribution
to Singapore's GDP from
tech-enabled startups

99,000
jobs are expected to be
created by startups for
the Singaporean economy
by 2035

Startup sectors to keep an eye on:

Key startup sectors



Fintech



Logistics



Ecommerce

Valuable emerging sectors:



Agri-Tech



Food tech



EduTech



Healthtech











Biotech



Deep tech

Singapore is ranked:

  <p>#1 in APAC #2 globally</p> <p>for talent competitiveness</p> <p>by INSEAD's global talent index 2021</p>	 <p>#1 globally</p> <p>in capital raising and financing</p> <p>by Global Innovation Index 2021</p>	 <p>#2 globally</p> <p>for ease of doing business</p> <p>by World Bank's Doing Business Survey 2020</p>	 <p>#8 globally</p> <p>most innovative nation</p> <p>by Global Innovation Index 2021</p>	   <p>#1 in SEA #5 Asia #17 globally</p> <p>startup ecosystem</p> <p>according to the Global Startup Ecosystem Report (GSER) 2021 by Startup Genome</p>
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¹StartupSG, Number of startups, last accessed 7 Jan 2022

²Trading Economics, Singapore Employed Persons, last accessed 7 Jan 2022



Singapore - The Talk of the Global Innovation Town

Singapore's recipe for success has been an unrivaled combination of speed, scalability, fund sourcing, and Government-supported incentives and programmes. These vital ingredients have been the catalyst for a highly collaborative ecosystem.

Speed and scalability in tandem

Global entrepreneurs have kept Singapore on their tabs for good reason. Startups have proliferated at a tremendous rate, quadrupling in numbers from 2014 to 2021 and many do not remain as startups for long. On average, it takes a fraction of the time for Singapore's startups to reach unicorn status - a speed that clocks Singapore 4th in the world alongside North America.

Singapore has experienced



400%

growth in the number of startups in 7 years



an average of

**6 YEARS
& 11 months**

for startups to reach unicorn status³

Countless investors, plentiful funds

Singapore is one of the top markets for startup establishment, and for good reason. Startup Genome ranked Singapore within the world's top 15 countries for ease of fund sourcing⁴. As of writing, Singapore hosts over 500 investors and 200 accelerators and incubators. This powerhouse has resulted in a median Series A funding value that far exceeds the global average.

Singapore's Series A funding

Averages around

US\$4.6M



Singapore

More than
1.5 times



Global

Averages around

US\$2.7M⁵

A supportive backbone

Generous Government incentives with extensive coverage are available to entrepreneurs and investors across various industries, whether they are foreign or local. From a variety of tax reduction schemes to various dedicated programmes for acquiring talent, mentoring founders, accelerating tech adoption, and strengthening equity and infrastructure options, startups in Singapore have had a wealth of aid options.

Government-supported incentive schemes include those from (but are not limited to):



Monetary Authority
of Singapore



INLAND REVENUE
AUTHORITY OF
SINGAPORE

³<https://www.straitstimes.com/business/companies-markets/singapore-ranked-joint-4th-best-economy-for-how-fast-startups-become>

⁴Startup Genome, Ecosystems, last accessed 7 Jan 2022

⁵Singapore Business Review, Navigating the startup ecosystem in Singapore, published Nov 2021

Internationally recognised

Singapore has been stealing the international spotlight for over a decade. Our nation has consistently secured a top 10 berth within the Global Innovation Index over the past 14 years. This continued in 2021 as Singapore ranked 1st in innovation and two new indicators: Capital Raising and Financing. However, owing to limitations in talent, openness, and sustainability, Singapore slipped from #1 in 2020 to #5 in the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook 2021⁶.



Singapore ranked

FIRST
in innovation input

by Global Innovation Index in 2021

An ecosystem growing bigger and stronger by the day

Singapore's collaborative ecosystem is an important differentiator. Today, established businesses increasingly model themselves after digital natives, and know that if they want to compete, they cannot succeed on their own. Every stakeholder plays an indispensable role in supporting the startup ecosystem, and ongoing multiparty collaborations between agencies and institutional bodies, as well as enterprises and startups, have helped the industry grow and thrive.



⁶IMD World Competitiveness Online, The reference database on World Competitiveness, last accessed 7 Jan 2022

However, Hidden Challenges Do Exist

Like young sprouting trees, startups in Singapore still face a gauntlet of challenges. This may seem by virtue of the business lifecycle stage they are in, but our research shows that new opportunities avenues for growth do exist, and some initiatives can be finetuned to tide startups who have promising ideas through the early vulnerable stages.

Most importantly, doing this will lead to an array of benefits for a wide range of stakeholders. This includes the creation of jobs, the potential for GDP growth, and the likelihood of boosting Singapore's reputation on the global stage.

This Position Paper zooms in on three key areas that we believe can be the catalyst for positive and widespread economic change:



**Improving
Market Access**



**Realising Talent
Opportunities**



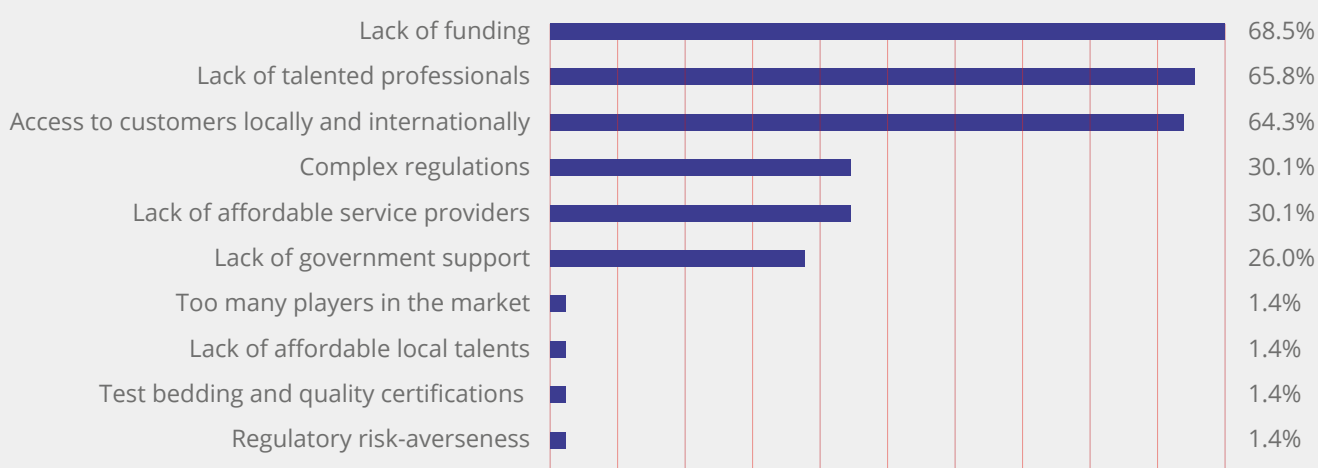
**Accelerating
Funding**

The findings are based on a survey commissioned by ACE and PwC Singapore's Venture Hub in October 2021 which revealed the most common challenges faced by startup owners (Figure 1).

Digging deeper, our team then conducted focus group discussions, and 1-1 interviews with over 120 key stakeholders in the startup community. In these discussions, the stakeholders discussed why Market Access, Talent, and Funding have been so challenging, and how the ecosystem can come together to resolve them. In this Position Paper, we first present to you a summary of these findings, along with our recommendations to resolve them.

Figure 1

Which of these challenges has your company experienced?





Summary: Local Market Access a Surprising Hurdle

COVID-19 has thrown a wrench on the international expansion plans held by many startups. Restrictions on events and travel have severely dampened the ability of startup leaders to establish a physical presence abroad. Startup leaders have had to adapt to the new norms of telecommunications, which have only amplified the difficulties of breaking into foreign - online webinar meeting markets.

Networking opportunities are dwindling



In the past, local startups faced difficulty in securing contracts and partnerships with larger companies and Government agencies, however with the aid of initiatives such as the Accreditation@SGD programme, the overall credibility of the startup scene has since been elevated.

However, startups today face a new problem - a lack of visibility and awareness of networking tools shrouds even the most innovative, industry-specific startups from potential business partners. This has been particularly challenging amid the pandemic with the social restrictions in place.

Many founders and venture capitalists attested that a big part of the startup world is who you know and who you have access to. The general sentiment on the ground is that networking tools such as the StartupSG network can be further padded, and more support levers could be made available to improve collaboration.

Difficulty exists when trying to access overseas markets



The ability for a homegrown startup to break into a foreign market is often determined not by their technology or their funds, but rather by their ability to overcome cultural barriers. International expansion brings with it a whole slew of hurdles to overcome including (but not limited to): new regulations, different taxation policies, unique social and business dynamics, and of course, language.

Some employees may educate themselves prior to setting off, but reality often differs starkly from expectations painted in textbooks. Invariably, startup founders find themselves spending considerable time grappling with nuances of foreign business relations, and market dynamics.

The three most common challenges startups face when accessing overseas markets:



Gathering accurate, concrete, and in-depth information on stakeholders and verticals



Getting regulatory approval for products and/or services and acceptance of POC's



Adapting and assimilating to unforeseen challenges on the ground



Summary: Talent Limitations Result in Missed Opportunities

Led by an astute and efficient Government, Singapore's economy progressed from low-end manufacturing through several stages to arrive at today's innovation-driven economy. This path involved stable careers at large enterprises, but as the world shifts online, entrepreneurial pursuits have now taken center stage. To ensure our economy can keep up, our society needs to acknowledge and respect entrepreneurship as a legitimate career option, and we need to value the experiences of all entrepreneurs and learn from one another to strengthen our talent pool.

Slow Talent Acquisition in a Fast-Paced Environment



Startup founders shared that hiring for specialised roles such as data scientists, software engineers, and even product specialists has been a major stumbling block towards growth. They have attributed this to Singapore's limited talent population⁷.

This predicament is exacerbated as startup founders believe the imbalance is a result of courses at local universities and various upskilling programmes that do not sufficiently prepare local professionals for the rigor and demands in the grueling technology scene.

The alternative of hiring foreign talent proves to be equally bumpy due to tedious working visa application procedures. Many startup founders felt like they had missed out on good hiring opportunities, and this forced them to postpone their growth plans.

According to data gathered by job search site Indeed, which was published in the Straits Times, Singapore's aging population is contributing to a mismatch between talent and job opportunities⁸.

In February 2019, the number one job advertised was for software engineers, yet roles in customer service and teaching were the most searched for and had the most applicants.

The Battle for Talent Continues to Grow



A testament to Singapore's growth is the fact that 80 of the world's top 100 technology firms have a sizable presence within our city-state. The negative ripple effect, however, is that these large enterprises can offer packages that are far more attractive than what startups can muster.

As large multinational enterprises are in better financial positions, they can invest in their employees and that helps them attract and retain the best talent. Given the severity of talent scarcity in Singapore's ecosystem, as well as the pressures imposed by the pandemic, competitive salaries are a prerequisite to securing talent.

This is of great concern as the World Bank projects the competition for top talent in Southeast Asia to grow. While Singapore has traditionally held an edge over our neighbours, startup founders fear the normalisation of cross-border and remote work could level the playing field.

Randstad's 2021 Tech Talent Expectations Survey ranked cybersecurity as the top industry in Singapore that lacked talent supply, followed closely by AI and automation, and data analytics.

⁷The Straits Times, Lack of local talent a big challenge in building workforce for S'pore firms: Survey, published on 24 September 2021

⁸The Straits Times, Tech talent shortage shows up in job mismatches, published on 16 September 2019

A Negative Social Stigma Poses a Risk to the Economy



A significant number of stakeholders also commented on how the notion of success is still heavily attributed to traditional positions - doctors, lawyers, or engineers. Working in the startup scene is still very much deemed to provide instability, lower rewards, and less recognition.

Stakeholders also frequently mentioned that a large majority of young professionals still believe that startup roles could be detrimental to their long-term career progression. The prevalence of these beliefs can dissuade Singaporeans from working at startups, especially during the early stages of their career.

Consequently, the local ecosystem may reach a point where innovation does not come to fruition simply because startups are unable to recruit the talent they need. These hiring woes need to be addressed because they do not only affect startups - they also create missed opportunities for our innovation-driven economy.

In 2015 Singapore was ranked top 10 in the Global Entrepreneurship Index. This Index measures entrepreneurial activity, aspiration, and ambition in 137 countries, against economic infrastructure. However, by 2021, Singapore slid to the number 18 spot, which is indicative of the challenges we are highlighting in this Position Paper.





Summary: Funding Roadblocks to Resolve

Singapore is known as a geographic location where venture capital dollars can be raised with relative ease. According to the Second Minister for Trade and Industry Dr Tan See Leng, startups drew in S\$5.5 billion of capital in 2020⁹. However, our research also shows barriers to funding still exist and the ripple effect is, it's the employees that are feeling the heat. This is compounded by the fact that investors are acting with caution towards new sectors, and the promising deep tech sector may be overlooked. Infinite possibilities await if this situation can be improved.

⁹The Business Times, Singapore takes lion's share of venture dollars in South-east Asia, published 30 March 2021

High barriers to entry still exist



Despite an array of funding programmes, many startup founders reported difficulty in qualifying for existing options and cited that they still must expend heavily on financial resources to get their ideas off the ground.

This is exacerbated by funding caps, as well as the challenge to meet fixed costs, despite slowed revenue streams and quieter funding activity amid the pandemic. The alternative approach of taking a traditional bank loan has also been difficult to obtain in infancy business stages.

The unfortunate aftermath of this is that it's the employees that are feeling the impact. It's been reported that uncertain sales trajectories, payroll cuts, slashed marketing budgets, and the need to negotiate payments terms with vendors are leading to layoffs, rescinded job offers, and burnout¹⁰.

74% of startups saw their revenues decline since the beginning of the virus outbreak.
(Source: Startup Genome)

Investors are acting with caution

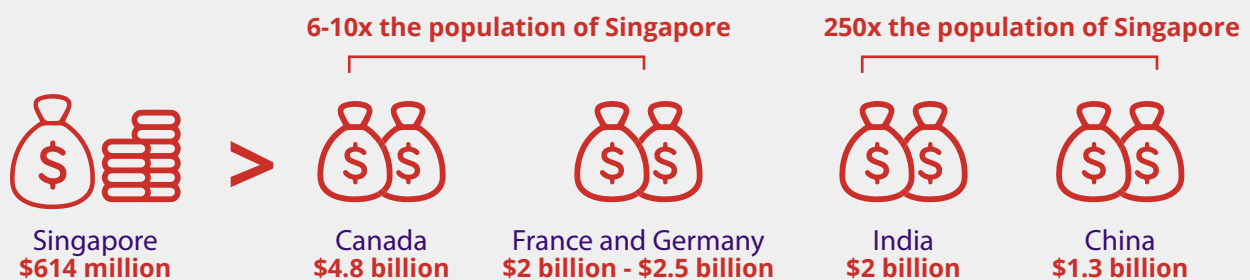


A roadblock that is unique to Singapore is that investors are showing a stronger preference towards fintech and e-commerce sectors. The financial sector was on-track to capture triple the amount of investment raised YoY in 2021¹¹ and another report shows that the internet economy was expected to grow by 35% YoY¹².

Fintech-focussed funding is particularly in the spotlight as Singapore has been reaching investment levels of countries many times its size. Singapore's fintech investment level is swinging well above its weight compared to neighbouring countries including China, India, and Australia.

While this is positive for our fintech and e-commerce sectors, there is concern that other promising sectors that offer economic value are being overlooked. Many founders provided feedback that businesses operating in other sectors have been less able to secure funding.

Total fintech investment in first half of 2021



Source: Tech Crunch

¹⁰The Business Times, Singapore takes lion's share of venture dollars in South-east Asia, published 30 March 2021

¹¹Bloomberg, Singapore Sees Fintech Funding Tripling This Year to \$3 Billion, published 8 November 2021

¹²The Straits Times, Internet economy investments in South-east Asia at all-time high in 2021: Report, published 10 November 2021

Deep tech is overlooked and underestimated



While it's only natural for investors to value tangible assets and concrete cash flows over intangibles such as branding, technology, and data, this results in a lost opportunity for some startups as they are formed and held together by unproven ideas, yet immense potential.

This issue is compounded in the realm of deep tech, where Artificial Intelligence and Synthetic data solutions are conceived in complex and high-risk research facilities that require higher cash outlay and longer cash runways. As a result, many deep tech startups have been undervalued.

If investors shy away from deep tech, the sector will remain nascent and our early-stage growth in this high potential area will be hindered. This is a missed opportunity for our economy as deep tech offers the potential for ground-breaking value to humanity. An opportunity also exists to develop a competitive advantage in this space and shine across the region.

According to SGInnovate, it's common to see deep tech solutions require up to 10 years to reach time-to-market, which is usually beyond the lifespan of a typical VC fund¹³.



¹³SGInnovate, Uncovering the Rise and Challenges of Singapore Deep Tech Startups, published 2 February 2021



How to Overcome our Talent, Market Access and Funding Woes

Market Access - The Surprising Hurdle to Conquer

Market Access refers to the ability of a company to sell goods and services, access customers and partners, and spread its business network both within and outside of its home country.

For good reason, Market Access has been an ongoing focus of the Singapore Government.

A testament to the Government's success in this area is that the largest majority of startup founders we interviewed voted ease of market access as a deciding factor for their decision to set up in Singapore (Figure 2).

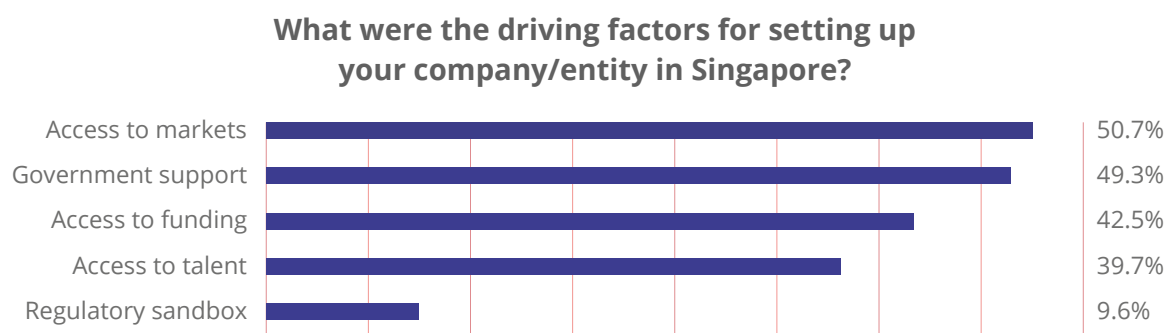


Figure 2

That said, startups still face a gauntlet of challenges as they build and grow their business and there's still a high 50% of respondents who rank other driving factors. This is especially critical in Singapore as by virtue of the lower population figures and limited domestic market size, our local startups are highly dependent on overseas markets for growth.

ACE advocates that integrated coordination across agencies will help ensure that Market Access continues to remain an attractive pull factor for setting up in Singapore. This is supported by conversations that we had with many startup founders who would often bring up the MTI's Pro-Enterprise Panel (PEP) as a shining example of a well-designed integrated platform. It was said that the PEP allowed businesses to communicate with the relevant public agencies in real-time and receive timely, effective, and practical solutions in return.



Three Ways to Improve Market Access

ACE recommends that the Government continues its focus on building international ties and expansion platforms and spearheads more startup expansion initiatives while continuing to drive local initiatives in parallel.

The Goal -

Continue to prioritise international ties and expansion platforms

Recommendation one:

Work towards having Singapore's regulations and standards recognised as a benchmark in overseas countries.



Why it's needed:

As the de facto startup ecosystem leader within Southeast Asia, Singapore can take our status a step further by leading discussions with larger economic zones including the EU, US, and UK. The Government can seek to align on selected policies such as Personal Data so that local startups can heighten their presence internationally via like-for-like certifications.

This is necessary because one of the challenges that our startups face is the difficulty in working with customers from different geographies that have different terms.

The benefits:

Similar initiatives have already boosted market access for startups and facilitated inflows of talent, money, ideas, innovation, and technology and we can expect the same results if such initiatives were expanded.

By promoting more resource inflows, there is also the potential to expand the scope of viable business in Singapore. This will no doubt lower market barriers and operational costs. With targeted expansion efforts through liaison with overseas agencies, startups will also be able to improve cost effectiveness and penetrate market quicker.

How it will work:

The proof is in the success of the Global Innovation Alliance network and other ESG initiatives which have helped local startups to tap into resources within 12 partner countries and 16 partner cities for business development. We recommend that such programmes be further expanded to include other regions and verticals, including Latin America, pharmaceuticals and deep tech which is lacking presence, and a job portal in those markets should be considered to ease hiring woes for overseas branches.

Larger enterprises could also play a role by bringing a network of startups with them when they conduct business in overseas markets. This allows startups to experience business operations in new markets in a supported environment.

It will be good if the Government can help enable more fluid interaction between the startup companies in Singapore and counterparts in mature innovation hubs such as the US. This interaction and exchange can be in the form of talent, senior management, business development support, market access/ support etc. This will enable the ecosystem to grow by learning the ropes from more established hubs.

- Startup survey respondent

The Goal -

Streamline the process for getting market access support, grants, and partnerships

Recommendation two:

Minimise the long application procedures for market access support in order to make more resources available for partnership identification and overseas local hiring.



Why it's needed:

Market access-related support and grants such as the Market Readiness Assistance grant (MRA) have been benefiting startups - if they are obtained. The goal is to help prevent startups from falling into the unenviable situation of liquidating company assets due to delays in reimbursement.

Long application procedures spanning several months are detrimental to startups that rely on being at the right moment at the right time and are equally detrimental to our ecosystem as many deserving enterprises and innovative ideas end up setting sail for new markets.

Our startup founders may not adequately understand consumer behaviour and preferences across different regions.

The benefits:

This setup will optimise resource allocation and boost investor confidence by maximising the chances for investment dollars to reach the right hands, at the right time. Enabling startups to expand overseas can also increase Singapore's international presence as startups double as proxies and ambassadors for Singapore. In the long run, this creates a snowball effect and encourages more entrepreneurs and investors to consider doing business in Singapore.

How it will work:

ACE recommends that the Government utilises the good relationship that has been developed with the Trade Associations and Chambers (TACs) and the Institution of Engineers, Singapore (IES) with their counterparts in ASEAN and APAC. By leveraging these relations, we can aid startups when it comes to partnership identification and local hiring overseas. Through the Enterprise Singapore (ESG) offices, ACE and IES could assist to establish startup incubators in overseas markets.

Enterprise Singapore Grants can accelerate growth, but the processes must be streamlined and tailored for individual startups for greater effectiveness.

- Startup survey respondent

The Goal -

Continue to support local market access initiatives in parallel

Recommendation three:

Foster active collaboration across our local startup ecosystem, particularly between large enterprises and startups.



Why it's needed:

ACE recommends further and ongoing promotion of Startup SG as a platform/resource for local startups to gain visibility in the local market. To increase the likelihood of success, we recommend new dimensions that allow large enterprises and venture capitalists to seek out startups with technology and innovative ideas. This, and other similar avenues, will raise the profile of local startups and ultimately lead to local businesses becoming the first choice when large scale enterprises start their search for new solutions.

The benefits:

Notwithstanding the success of a handful of local startups, the startup community feels there is a drop in support for budding entrepreneurs and many founders reported that they struggle to convince local partners to work with them.

If the Government takes the lead in fostering active collaboration between startups and multinational corporations (MNCs) and large local enterprises (LLEs), we believe this situation can be reversed with relative ease. With an emphasis on the importance of business partnerships, ACE believes deeper and mutually beneficial business ties can be forged which benefits everyone. Essentially, we need to curate more “matchmaking sessions” between MNCs, LLEs and SMEs, with our local startups. We hope to encourage businesses to source for solutions locally in the first instance.

How it will work:

Large corporations can step in to provide a safe umbrella under which several startups can collaborate. This queen bee approach to expansion can create a win-win scenario where startups can serve as the arms and legs of MNCs that in turn provide fresh perspectives through new technology, innovative solutions, and thought processes.

Along this journey, the efforts made to provide startups with more support should be continually broadcasted via events, trade shows, and exhibitions. Greater publicity will not only serve to raise the awareness of startups and related Government efforts, but it will also provide invaluable networking and matchmaking opportunities for startups and MNCs alike.

A large number of venture capitalists, and a fast-developing ecosystem provides a good environment for startups. But the region is fast catching up and unless there are more Government schemes to encourage early-stage startups, Singapore might fall behind in the next half decade.

- Startup survey respondent

Talent - The Missing Piece of the Puzzle

We cannot emphasise enough how much local startups are restricted by talent acquisition woes. This persisting problem has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which made it more difficult for foreign talent to enter Singapore. However, it was a double-edged sword because amid the pandemic, large tech companies rapidly expanded and the number of new startups skyrocketed.

This mismatch between demand and supply heated the competition for talent, however large enterprises had an “unfair advantage”. With bigger wallets they were able to offer generous compensation packages, and this extinguished the dreams of many startup founders. Startups with promising ideas failed not because of the potential of their technology, but because they were unable to recruit the right talent at the right time.



65.8% of respondents cited talent limitations as one of the main challenges restricting growth and expansion

Several reoccurring points surfaced during our research and discussions with stakeholders regarding talent scarcity:



Matching local talent with business needs



Identifying suitable upskilling programmes



Hiring foreign talent under tightened restrictions



The negative perception of startup careers in Singapore



Keeping up with high compensation expectations

To address these challenges, ACE recommends that the Government take a multi-faceted approach and dedicate more resources to assist startups in talent acquisition.

Better incentives and support will attract the new generation to study and pursue a career in technological fields.
- Startup survey respondent



Six Ways to Strengthen Talent Pipelines

ACE recommends that the Government designs and implements more courses that are fit for purpose, work towards boosting the attractiveness of startup careers, incentivises collaboration between startups and large enterprises, and makes it easier for startups to bring in foreign talent.

Three Important Talent Findings

The top 3 roles startups are trying to fill

Our survey findings reveal that Business Developers, Data Scientists, and Product Developers are the top 3 most sought-after roles across all startup disciplines.

What are the top 3 roles most in demand at your company?

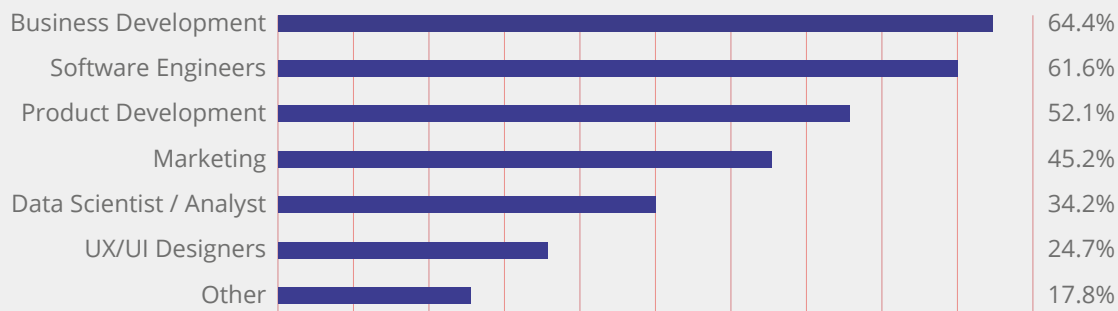


Figure 3

Startups seek greater support for upskilling/reskilling employees

Over 70% of respondents reported insufficient, or moderately insufficient support for upskilling and reskilling employees. This is particularly cited for older professionals who seek to cross over into new industries.

Is there sufficient government support for upskilling/reskilling your company's employees?

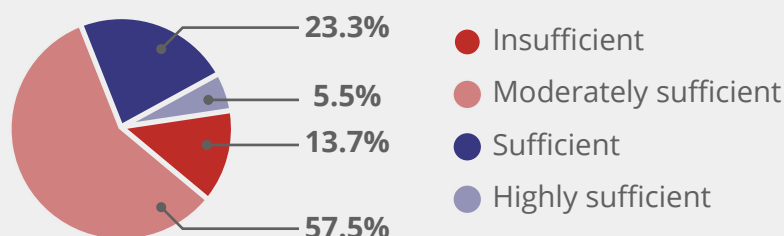


Figure 4

Existing subsidised courses have been deemed ineffective

A staggering 80% of respondents indicated that existing Government-subsidised courses were either 'ineffective' or just 'moderately effective' in transferring the appropriate skills and knowledge to employees.

Are government subsidised courses effective in transferring appropriate skill knowledge to your staff?

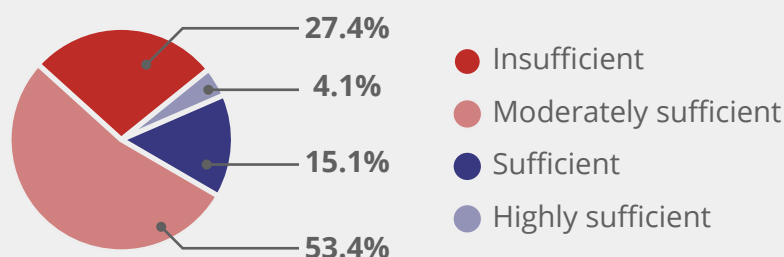


Figure 5

The Goal -

Design and implement new courses that are fit for purpose

Recommendation one:

Fund a dedicated university programme that is co-designed with startup founders, so it is fit for purpose.



Why it's needed:

The intention is to create a tailored two to three-year programme that addresses the needs of startup founders so that startup employees can be better prepared for what's involved in bringing ideas to market. This programme should provide students the opportunity to spend a sizable portion of their time in a startup workplace, complemented by classroom reflection and discussion.

The benefits:

Such a programme has multiple benefits. First, it will eliminate the need for cumbersome and short-lived internship programmes that small or non-existent HR teams at many startups do not have the capacity to facilitate. The students will also be better equipped to enter the startup workforce and with more enthusiasm, they are likely to be more productive when they commence work. As a result, it is expected that these employees will stay with the company over a longer period. This will benefit startups as they seek employees who can be deeply ingrained in the company's objectives and support the company over a 2–3-year period, or more.

How it will work:

Most importantly, startup founders are eager to share their knowledge and contribute to tailoring these programmes for the benefit of all. By involving these professionals when designing the programme, the Government can be assured that the modules and structure of the course are sufficient to address the skills where there is an evident deficit. Many startup founders we spoke to also acknowledge that with such a programme, students could join their company at a higher level, and this would forgo the need to spend many costly hours on training.

The Government may also invite startup founders to design programmes for mid-career individuals who are looking to re-enter the professional sphere or pivot between industries. The startup founders we spoke to are keenly aware of the existing skills gaps, for example, intangible asset management, and are eager to help inform programme decisions. The flow-on effect is that these tech startups can benefit from having access to more mid-career individuals, particularly those who have software engineering, data science, product specialisation, and intangible asset management skills.

~50% of enterprises indicated in a recent national IP (Intellectual Property) survey that business development could be improved if employees were equipped with IP skills¹⁴.

¹⁴<https://www.ipos.gov.sg/resources/singapore-ip-survey>

Recommendation two:

Continue to sponsor and expand programmes for young and upcoming talent.



Why it's needed:

We encourage the Singapore Government to persist in maintaining and expanding its network with universities both in Singapore, and abroad. Even as universities continue to grapple with pandemic-induced difficulties, efforts to build upon the successes of the NUS Overseas Colleges (NOC) programme should continue.

The benefits:

We believe that collaborative efforts with universities are the cornerstone of developing young entrepreneurs, both locally and overseas. The benefits of allowing our young talent to experience entrepreneurship abroad and exposing local students to incoming foreign talent should not be discounted. This exchange will continue to stimulate the local entrepreneurial scene and give rise to the cross-pollination of skills that will keep Singapore relevant internationally.

Other ideas:

The Government could also embed high-demand technology skills in Singapore's National Service programme - such as the Cyber NSF scheme launched in 2018 by MINDEF. This will allow full-time National Servicemen to receive training in cyber defence.

Given that robotics and cyber-rated skills are currently in high demand amongst tech startups (and will continue to be for the foreseeable future), the Government may wish to consider supplementing the National Service regimes with more technical training to further aid the local talent supply shortages.



The Goal -

Make it easier for startups to bring in foreign talent

Recommendation three:

Adapt the ratio for local and foreign talent for startups.



Why it's needed:

Owing to limits set on the number of employment passes that can be issued at any one time, startup founders are eager to see an alternative pass implemented. It is hoped that an alternative pass would grant permission for foreign employees to work in Singapore for up to six months.

We also recommend the Government works together with ACE and stakeholders to produce a directory that lists positions our home-grown startups wish to fill according to costs and expertise. In instances where there is a monetary deficit, the startups may opt to offer equity to cover the shortfall. Doing this in tandem with additional waivers on employment levies, and the implementation of a short-term work pass will lead to a much-needed influx of talent.

The benefits:

Startups almost unanimously agree that employing foreign talent is nearly impossible given the current constraints on employment passes (EPs) and as a result, remote hiring has been on an upward trend since the COVID-19 outbreak. However, this presents a risk to local intellectual property. The suggested directory, plus employment levy waivers, and short-term work passes can prevent loss of talent to other markets and ensure high-value ideas are retained on our shores.

If more companies can link up with the right talent, startups will have more time to grow their company, instead of spending time looking for the right talent that fulfills all the employment pass criteria - no easy feat. In turn, we can expect to see more tech companies reach their full potential.

How it will work:

Hiring overseas talent can plug talent gaps within Singapore's workforce. This will provide much-needed relief for companies that have been searching amongst the local population with little success.

The startup ecosystem would also like to see existing career fairs that are organised by ESG, EDB, and ACE do more to highlight job openings in overseas markets. Working together, we will ensure job advertisements are localised for overseas markets to attract the best talent to Singapore.

+75% of startup survey respondents have less than 10 employees in Singapore.

The Goal -

Incentivise collaboration between startups and large enterprises

Recommendation four:

Provide incentives for placement programmes between large corporations and startups.



Why it's needed:

Skills may be transferable, but experiences are unique. The reality is startups are able to provide employees with cross-disciplinary opportunities across departments and this helps young employees tremendously. They are able to receive a clearer overview of business operations from a higher vantage point; something that is a rarity within larger organisations.

The benefits:

Singapore's increasingly competitive landscape is often cited as the main challenge amongst startup founders. If local tech talent, who make up a small minority of the working population, are no longer snatched up by big players offering more attractive salaries, startups with new ideas and new technology will be in a better position to compete.

How it will work:

By championing startup programmes and highlighting the career advantages of working for a startup company, the Government can encourage a more collaborative environment where startups and MNCs can coexist. ACE can also contribute by facilitating talent placement and exchange programmes.

Facilitating or providing connections can open doors by offering startups with opportunities to present their proof of concepts to larger corporations.
- Startup survey respondent



The Goal -

Boost the attractiveness of startup careers

Recommendation five:

Take a more proactive and early-stage approach to promote entrepreneurship.



Why it's needed:

Entrepreneurship may have gained prominence in Singapore's business landscape over the years, but local perceptions and the understanding of what's involved in a career at a startup are still lagging internationally. We seek to increase the focus on innovation as the current education curriculum heavily emphasises traditional knowledge spheres which have been identified as one of the root causes behind the shortage of innovative talent.

The benefits:

With the Governments support, innovation labs, incubators, and student venture hubs will be added to the already robust repertoire of tools within the Institutes of Higher Learning (IHL). We anticipate that this upstream approach will not only bring in strong, sustained waves of talent in years to come but also go a long way in weeding out biases towards startups and allowing the entrepreneurial spirit to flourish locally.

How it will work:

ACE seeks to work closely with the Ministry of Education to incorporate innovation modules into the primary and secondary curriculum that will benefit the startup ecosystem. For instance, we recommend that mandatory internship programmes be included within secondary and junior college syllabi. Activities such as 'Innovation Week', where Government-sponsored competitions are held to create awareness and encourage entrepreneurship from a young age are also encouraged.

"The mentality when it comes to joining a startup has to change. Too many are too afraid of failure. Providing more avenues for potential hires to interact with startups can help change prevailing perceptions."

- Startup survey respondent



Recommendation six:

Implement a mentorship programme between successful entrepreneurs and young aspiring entrepreneurs.



Why it's needed:

Another challenge that impacts the attractiveness of a startup career is the shortage of coaches available for new startups founders. This contrasts with the Bay Area, where a founder could get easy access to at least two startup coaches with ease.

Many of Singapore's illustrious entrepreneurs have crossed paths with the local Government through various partnerships, projects, and events during their extensive careers. Having been in close contact with successful entrepreneurs, the Singapore Government is in a good position to close the loop and facilitate knowledge transfer from these entrepreneur stalwarts to the next generation of startup founders.

The benefits:

This measure will help close the talent loop and create a system where learning points and skills can be continuously transferred from one generation of entrepreneurs to the next. By encouraging interaction and collaboration, startups and unicorns alike can experience mutual growth by tapping into one another's strengths.

How it will work:

ACE would like to spearhead publicity efforts by promoting success stories of local startups that will be identified by the Government. Ideally, these are unicorns who have played an integral role in impacting or shaping Singapore's existing economic landscape. These stories will serve as inspiration to early-stage startups and help spur their growth.

Assign a startup mentor to guide the founder on how to roll this out with minimal costs to the team to get traction quick with a working MVP.

- Startup survey respondent



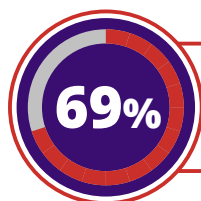
Funding - The Lifeblood of any Successful Startup

The clouds seem to be clearing for Singapore-based tech startups, but fears of an undetected storm remain. Indeed, local enterprises raised over two times the amount of capital gathered in 2020 over the first nine months of 2021, (S\$5.5 billion vs S\$11.2 billion)¹⁵ and regionally, Singapore does possess an outstanding track record with 10 out of 21 unicorns emerging from our little red dot in 2021 alone.

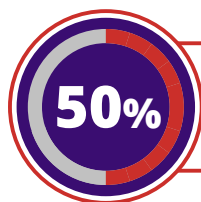
However, despite these impressive numbers, we should not be lulled into a false sense of security and become complacent as many startup founders continue to cite unabated fears.



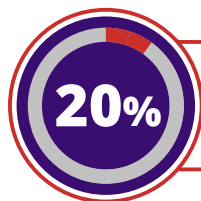
Funding fears are rising



of startup respondents perceive raising funds as a 'difficult task'



of startup respondents took 1 to 2 years to raise funds



of startup respondents do not think Singapore is a good location to secure investments

¹⁵Enterprise Singapore, Singapore as a Springboard to Asia and the World, published 10 November 2021

Throughout our in-depth conversations with startup founders and venture capitalists, three themes continually surfaced when discussing fundraising struggles which signal the ecosystem is not aligned:



Local venture capitalists have increasingly high expectations of early-stage startups.

Common expectations held by venture capitalists include seeing traction in the local market, strong overseas presence, and a proven track record of revenue generation.

However, a misalignment exists as many venture capitalists share that startups are unable to articulate the potential of their technology.



Venture capitalists lack an understanding in complex technology and other intangible assets.

Many startups reported that investors struggle to understand the nuances and value of their technology, particularly in deep tech. As a result they said it is increasingly common for investors to get cold feet at the decision making stage. At the same time, venture capitalists felt these startups were unable to differentiate themselves.



Government grant approvals have become more difficult to attain.

Founders mentioned that certain funds, such as Enterprise Singapore's Enterprise Development Grant, are granted on a reimbursement basis. This locks many startups out of reimbursement grants as they lack the financial capability to fund initiatives upfront.

Finding and securing the right investors at the right time is a make-or-break situation for any startup. The following six recommendations provide ways for the Government to ease the fundraising rollercoaster and reduce the "luck" factor that is restricting growth.

At the same time, these recommendations will help overcome the misalignment that appears to exist in the ecosystem between venture capitalists, startup founders, and the Government.

The background of the slide features a close-up of two hands shaking in a firm grip. The hands are positioned in the upper half of the frame, with the left hand slightly higher than the right. The skin tone is dark. The background is a deep blue with large, semi-transparent white numbers (3, 4, 5, 9, 19) scattered across it. At the bottom, a faint silhouette of a city skyline is visible. A thick red horizontal bar is located just below the handshake image, separating it from the white text area below.

Six Ways to Accelerate Funding

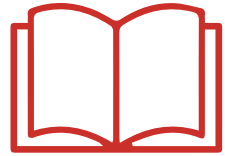
ACE recommends the Government seeks to improve engagement between enterprises, and venture capitalists and startups. This can be done by implementing a more systematic approach to matchmaking startups and investors, and organising roadshows to educate stakeholders in the venture capitalist ecosystem on the latest technology.

The Goal -

Improve engagement between enterprises, venture capitalists and startups

Recommendation one:

Engage more knowledge partners within the ecosystem to educate startups on funding intricacies.



Why it's needed:

With a coordinated educational programme, startup founders and executives will be able to interact with one another and gain valuable business strategy and funding advice from experienced entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, Government agencies, and consultants.

The benefits:

This can improve the success rates of funding pitches by giving startup founders more opportunities to pitch and refine their problem statements with industry experts.

This would be further enhanced if startup owners are encouraged to attend courses, such as the Lean Launchpad, to test the feasibility of their business models. This proactive approach will save startups valuable time and capital by giving them the opportunity to make informed tweaks and adjustments before execution.

Ultimately, this will bridge the gap between investor expectations and startup capacity and empower startups to not only develop more effective business strategies with limited resources, but also execute them more efficiently.

How it will work:

Established agencies with track records of supporting startups, such as ACE, and Institutes of Higher Learning, can be entrusted with the task of guiding and mentoring startup leaders.

These institutions are primed to take on this role as we are well connected with industry stakeholders and have ample experience and resources to help startups stay on the right path.

For example, NUS Enterprise has engaged ACE to supplement the mentorship portion of the well-known National Lean LaunchPad for all Autonomous Universities programme. Our goal would be to ensure that startups emerge with long-term solutions and an understanding of sustainable fund raising flows so they can operate consistently between fundraising cycles.

The Government can definitely showcase a handful of "poster-child" companies such as Carousell - to demonstrate how coupled with a sound and credible business model, startups can succeed with the current tools in place.

- Startup survey respondent

Recommendation two:

Implement a more systematic approach to matchmaking startups and investors



Why it's needed:

Finding and selecting the right investor is the first, yet most critical step to fund raising. However, we found startups do not fully understand why their fund raising efforts fell through. This proves that beyond just monetary assistance, startups need to choose investors that fit with their strategic and business needs. With more sector-themed networking events this matchmaking process can be more streamlined.

The benefits:

This initiative will aid in raising the visibility of single and multi-family offices and make it possible to diversify the pool of investors. In turn, family office investors will be better equipped to understand the opportunities that local startups possess and the potential of their solutions. As a result, we expect more startups to bounce back quicker, return stronger, and scale.

By clustering venture capitalists, private equity firms, and family offices based on their sectors of interest, it will further aid deal processes, and increase the chances of startups being matched up with the right investor who understands the technology and business potential.

On a macro level, this strategy will also drive more investment capital from family offices into the local tech scene which will be particularly helpful for niche industries including MICE and gaming, which require specific sector knowledge and expertise.

How it will work:

ESG can develop a Venture Capitalists directory with in-depth venture capitalist profiles that startup leaders could use to find appropriate partners. This directory could also be expanded to include other stakeholders such as knowledge partners, corporate venture arms, or trade associations.

ACE also strongly recommends the Government consider a partnership with the Singapore Venture Capital & Private Equity Association (SVCA). SVCA already possesses an extensive database of both local and foreign investors and this can be tapped into and built upon to create a comprehensive one-stop directory.

Further collaborative efforts could come in the form of ACE's partnership with various ecosystem specialists including Startup Genome or Startup Blink. Our goal is to bolster collaboration across the entire ecosystem.



We often find ourselves pitching to junior venture capitalist analysts who lack experience and expertise in technology. On the other hand, senior analysts are too risk-averse!

- MedTech Startup Founder



Recommendation three:

Organise roadshows to educate stakeholders in the venture capitalist ecosystem on the latest technology and gather input from venture arms.



Why it's needed:

Knowledge gaps will be mitigated among venture capitalists if ACE can work in collaboration with the Government to organise educational roadshows with sector-specific experts.

The benefits:

Not only will this create opportunities for venture capitalists to participate and learn about the latest trends in new sectors, such as deep tech, it will also assist venture capitalists to make more informed investment decisions that will benefit our entire ecosystem.

How it will work:

The ACE team is ready to assist with feedback gathering should the Government decide to proceed with the facilitation and spearheading of such efforts. By doing so, we hope to strengthen industry benchmarks and make general requirements more apparent for all involved.

Larger number of partnership events with overseas venture capitalists and investors. This will help to bring not just funding but the relevant expertise to startups who want to go global from the beginning.
- MedTech Startup Founder



The Goal -

Fast-track Government grant processes

Recommendation four:

Set up a private and public sector panel to coach grants applicants and investigate obstacles faced by banks and venture capitalists



Why it's needed:

With clear guidance and coaching from Government agencies, a lower percentage of grant applications will be rejected due to form invalidation, a failure to accurately communicate the value of certain technology, or the inability to appeal to decision-makers.

At the same time, an investigation into the obstacles that banks and venture capitalists face when evaluating startups will reveal much-needed information on the challenges they face. We believe the Government is in a good position to act as a mediator and pass on this feedback to startup owners.

The benefits:

Feedback from both public and private sectors can help inform more holistic grant qualifications criteria that are universally understood by both grant providers and startups leaders - effectively allowing startups to fail faster.

Not only will this drastically boost the success rate of grant applications, it will also create greater efficiency of approval processes with the potential to save on resources as the applicants would have a better understanding of the qualifying criteria.

How it will work:

Through collaboration with the venture arms of leading banks and MNCs, ACE and the relevant Government bodies will serve as a communication bridge between funding figures and startups. The Government may conduct a preliminary round of filtering before grant applications are sent to venture arms so that they can concentrate their efforts on a final pool of candidates with greater potential.



We encountered difficulty raising funds from late 2019 to late 2020 as most venture capital funds focused limited resources on existing portfolio companies during the uncertain COVID period. It would have been helpful if the government agencies can influence large enterprises and Government-related funding sources to bridge the gap during this extraordinary period.

- Startup survey respondent



Recommendation five:

Streamline and accelerate the grant application process



Why it's needed:

With a more transparent and flexible evaluation process, along with greater feedback, the grant application process can become a learning experience for the startup, rather than a cumbersome form-filling exercise.

The benefits:

With less stringent and rigid grant criteria and the inclusion of feedback loops, we can look forward to lesser system backlogs and the possibility of more ideas coming to fruition.

This will encourage more startups to focus on continuous improvement and ignite more enthusiasm across the ecosystem.

How it will work:

ACE and the ecosystem players recognise that the Government faces the arduous task of finding and maintaining the right balance and exercising budget prudence. Nevertheless, we hope that grant application processes can be accelerated via minor criterion tweaks for applicants that show promise within their sectors.

Funding is a sensitive issue and the underlying issues may be more complex and systemic than what it appears to be on the surface. As the national trade association representing startups, ACE is eager to play a larger role in assisting with grant applications and grant administrations. We hope to help untangle the issues that are preventing local startups from fulfilling their potential.



Simplify grant application process or provide other form incentives to help and support small local technology startups to grow.

- Startup survey respondent



The Goal -

Play a part in boosting valuation figures

Recommendation six:

Provide support and tools for startups during valuation stages



Why it's needed:

There are untapped value in startup valuations that could be realised if their owners are given the tools to accurately communicate the value of their technology and other intangible assets. This could include properly defining their value proposition, and evaluating their points of differentiation with concrete metrics.

The benefits:

This recommendation is aligned with recommendations from the Singapore IP Strategy (SIPS) 2030 which states that startups can benefit from intangible asset disclosure frameworks and valuation guidelines that provide greater certainty and help them benchmark their solutions.

On a wider scale, better communication can lead to outcomes such as higher valuations and a greater grant application success rate, giving deserving technology a better chance at coming to life. It has the potential to help companies with good product-market fit develop quicker and this can lead to the creation of new jobs.

How it will work:

The Government can tap into its wide industry network to develop an informed and comprehensive framework and reference point that will reduce ambiguity. Specifically, ACE could work in conjunction with the IPOS and relevant Government agencies to raise awareness on the tools that startups can use to accurately appraise intangible assets such as branding, confidential information, and proprietary algorithms.

Having subject matter experts with actual startup building experiences to assess the start-ups on their potential growth and areas of needs for funding to guide them on their grants applications.

- Startup survey respondent



Concluding Remarks - The road ahead

The idea of writing a Position Paper was first conceived with the goal of assisting Singapore's startups amid the evolving challenges that surfaced during the pandemic. However, as the conversations with key startup stakeholders took shape, ACE discovered an abundance of hidden challenges that we believe are preventing our ecosystem from playing an even greater role on the global stage. It became our mission to compile these honest insights and deserving ideas into a comprehensive report so that our startup ecosystem can realise its true economic potential.

We would like to specially thank distinguished members of the Steering Committee, as well as PwC Singapore's Venture Hub team spearheaded by Patrick Yeo, for collaborating with ACE and serving as a trustworthy Knowledge Partner whom we could count on throughout the Position Paper's development. Your invaluable contributions will not be forgotten, and we look forward to watching your ideas come to life in Singapore's startup ecosystem.

ACE would also like to acknowledge the thoughtful contributions of the many startup leaders, MNCs, and various stakeholders, without whom this Position Paper would not have been possible. Your active participation and earnest responses during the surveys and focus groups have shed much light on the way forward and will no doubt benefit Singapore's future.

Singapore's startup ecosystem has performed thus far, thanks to the undying efforts of the Government and fervent dedication of our startup entrepreneurs and stakeholders. Moving forward into the present era of uncertainty and turbulence, there remains much work to be done to sustain Singapore's edge, particularly in the midst of the current global reshuffling that is taking place. However, ACE believes that together, we can pave the way forward and look forward to many more victories to come.



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Thank You.

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Thank You.





Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE) is the National Voice for the Singapore startup ecosystem, and a key trade association representing the interests of startups in Singapore. ACE has more than 2,000 members, representing over 1,300 startups.

ACE constantly seeks to build a vibrant and sustainable startup ecosystem in Singapore, and focuses on five key pillars: Startups, Corporations, Institutes of Higher Learning, Risk Capital, and Public Sector. As the driving force behind Singapore as an Innovation Island, ACE is creating a virtual and physical space where ideas, knowledge, and capabilities are transformed into value efficiently.

ACE was established in 2003 by the Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry, and re-launched as a private sector-led, non-profit organisation in 2014. ACE's Patron is Dr Tan See Leng, Minister for Manpower and Second Minister for Trade and Industry.

Working closely with the Government and startups, ACE aims to promote entrepreneurship, catalyse new growth opportunities, scale startups and build champion enterprises.

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