NUS team wins top search engine prize

A TEAM from the National University of Singapore clinched the US$100,000 ($150,000) top prize in a competition to develop technologies for a next-generation search engine.

Dubbed The Star Challenge, the competition sought to encourage the development of technologies that can be used in a sophisticated search engine that is able to recognise objects in pictures and video, as well as words in audio.

The 10-month-long, multi-stage competition that kickstarted in January was organised by Singapore’s Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star) and attracted 56 teams from 17 countries. In each stage of the competition, teams had to refine their search technologies to suit different tasks.

Yesterday, the final five teams from Singapore, China, France, the United States and Japan duked it out at the newly-opened Fusionopolis in one-north business park.

According to the judges, the team from NUS won because its results in the finals were the most accurate. In under two hours, the teams had to find segments of speech and identify video scenes in search tasks. More challenging tasks included retrieving instances of spoken words in other languages, matched to a certain visual.

Mr Victor Goh, a member of the three-man winning team and a research staff from the NUS Lab for Media Search, said: "I think what gave us an edge over the other teams was our intuitive system. It could search and retrieve results much faster than some of the other teams. Our research focus is on performing efficient searches, so it was geared to the competition where time was very short."

With the proliferation of online new media platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Flickr, A*Star reckons such a search engine would be beneficial to the masses. Current ones only find pictures, video or audio files based on file names, tags and contextual text that appears on the same web page as the media file. HEDIRMAN SUPIAN