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## Industry gets a boost from a man with the Midas touch

THE semiconductor industry gets a boost on Monday with a matchmaker that can help different players link up.

The Microelectronics IC Design And System Association - or Midas - will connect students with companies, and help different businesses interact.

Associate Professor Yeo Kiat Seng of the Nanyang Technological University's school of electrical and electronic engineering hopes that Midas will help boost the shortfall of students entering the industry.

The 150 students from his division of circuits and systems are snapped up by companies when they finish learning how to design integrated circuits for chips.

Simply put, these are the specialists who create the brain cells that make for a brilliant computer, said Prof Yeo, a Midas board member.

Such designers fill what are known as fabless companies (those that design integrated circuits but do not get involved in fabricating them) and more are moving to Singapore.

### FAST FACTS

- Singapore's fast-growing precision engineering sector currently supports the electronics, transport, medical technology and other manufacturing sectors.

- In terms of wafer fabrication capacity, Singapore is ranked No.2 by city after Hsinchu, Taiwan, and No.6 by country. Today, it accounts for about 10 per cent of the world's foundry wafer output.

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There are already 40 such companies here and more are on the way.

Prof Yeo said that one such firm, Mediatech, has committed \$1.2 million to NTU scholarships. Just last month, electronic giant Panasonic gave \$1.1 million to NTU for the same cause.

Even green chips - or environmentally friendly circuitry in electronics - are part of the new research wave.

New investments in the electronics industry last year are expected to generate about 4,500 skilled jobs per year.

Recent examples of companies putting down roots here include American Form Factor, which makes wafer probe cards that produce micro springs smaller than the width of a human hair. It

will need a thousand employees by next year.

French wafer maker Soitec's \$700 million plant in Pasir Ris will be ready later this year and will need 500 people.

Here since 1991, Applied Materials said close to US\$500 million of its revenues last year came from South-east Asia alone.

It has already announced moves to grow divisions of its massive nanomanufacturing facility in Singapore.

The ecosystem in Singapore that Midas will encourage will link not only the technically-inclined to companies, but also the businesses within it.

For example, electronic design automation companies like Synopsys have needs that tie in with fabless companies like Mediatech, foundries like Chartered Semiconductor and packaging companies like Statchipac.

'There is very little interaction between all these players compared to the US, and it's important for information to be shared, so each can understand what the other is doing and there can be greater synergy using the products available without reinventing the wheel or outsourcing supplies from a different country,' Dr Yeo said.