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KOOPrime Takes It One Step At A Time

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HOW do you break into a multi-million dollar software market like China on the cheap? Local outfit KOOPrime is looking to its network of international students to give it a leg-up and open doors.

It is starting exploratory talks with Capital Biochip Co, a spin-off from the biology research labs at Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University.



And it has ongoing research and development tie-ups with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing University, Beijing Genome Institute and Tsinghua University.

Just about all of these tie-ups have come about as a result of KOOPrime bringing over research students from China through whom it established contacts, says CEO Lim Teck Sin.

KOOPrime began life in 2000 as a spin-off from the National University of Singapore (NUS), and this heritage helps it keep in touch with the academic circles through which it does most of its selling.

The company develops and sells software for bio-informatics - a new and burgeoning area in which computers are used to analyse biological data such as genome sequences. 'In a typical high-throughput test lab you have floods of data that you need to compare and analyse from a variety of sources,' Mr Lim says. 'Relying on free open source software can be very hard.'

For example, in a large laboratory, 384 samples from a single bio-chip may need to be compared with other data in an assay. And companies such as Singapore's MerLion Pharma and Australia's Cerylid Biosciences have huge libraries of biotic samples - rich sources of biological and chemical diversity for drug discovery.

For now, Mr Lim is realistic about his chances in the bio-informatics software segment - an area still described sometimes as a 'cottage industry' by analysts who follow it.

Projects, when realised, tend to be small-scale. They typically involve less than \$350,000 per installed site and software has to be heavily customised to meet specific user requirements.

Unable to compete head on with the financial muscle of much larger software companies, KOOPrime and others smaller players rely on alliances and knowledge of the local market.

For example, in 2002 KOOPrime tied up with super-computing pioneer Cray, Germany's Lion Bioscience and the Asia Pacific Bioinformatics Network to provide software to tie research projects together. And through an agreement with computer giant IBM, KOOPrime bundles its software with open source software to integrate public and commercial gene databases.

Mr Lim has modest expectations.

'You have to realise that you're small in a market,' he says. 'You just have to go one small step at a time.'

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