

A Special Feature Brought to You By **Singapore Management University**



## From theory to practice

SMU's entrepreneurial Philip Zerrillo connects the University with the outside world

PHILIP Charles Zerrillo, Singapore Management University's (SMU) executive director of its Centre for Management Practice and Case Writing Initiative, is brimming with energy. And that is an understatement.

"I stayed up till 1.30am and was awake since 4.30am," he said, walking around energetically in front of a whiteboard and describing his work.

Be it developing case studies on Asian companies and selling them to the world, publishing a magazine on Asian trends and issues, running seminars for faculty members here and abroad, and reaching out to the corporate community, Dr Zerrillo has his fingers in multiple pies. His portfolios include teaching six classes, being the dean of 21 postgraduate professional programmes and being an academic director for the PhD in General Management programme.

Meanwhile, he continues to start new programmes and think up new initiatives for the University. As a result, SMU is building a vibrant network of relationships with businesses and schools in Asia, even as it prepares a new generation of leaders, entrepreneurs and professionals who understand Asia.

With more than 100 cases on Asian businesses across 12 countries (and still counting) published in just three years, SMU has become the go-to place for academics around the world looking for insights on Asian businesses.

They can refer to case studies on, for example, the digital strategy of Starwood Hotels & Resorts in launching its W brand of boutique and luxury hotels here. There is also one on Scoot, Singapore Airlines' entry into the low-cost, long-haul market segment. Cases have also been written on the Tata Group in India and Unilever in Vietnam.

"People in the West don't think intellectual property or management theory can come out of this region in the world. They just think Asia steals intellectual property," Dr Zerrillo said.

"They don't realise there are many managers doing creative things. We can translate them into stories that could inform management thinking."

### Knowledge distribution

There are three main aspects of Dr Zerrillo's work at the Centre for Management Practice: developing and disseminating management knowledge, developing University faculty, and reaching out to the corporate community.

Originally hired by SMU to develop and teach in its Executive MBA programme, Dr Zerrillo soon noticed an opportunity for SMU in writing case studies centred on Asia.

"Only 5 per cent of business school case studies are written about Asia, and out of those written about Asia, only one in five are about Asian companies doing business. The majority are about multinational companies breaking into the Asian market and facing challenges in human resources, in the market, and legal difficulties," he said.

"Universities overseas are interested in Asia and what's happening here, but students are stuck learning about cases from the West. So I discussed this (with SMU management).

"It will be good for the faculty to develop a pedagogy they own, where they can be the experts telling the stories of this region. If we are successful, this will take us to other places."

SMU's Case Writing Initiative thus began in 2011. Case writers do research on prominent and leading Asian companies, and identify challenges or problems that the company has faced or is facing.

Then, they work with faculty members to polish their content. These cases are taught to SMU undergraduate and postgraduate students. Each case also has an accompanying teaching note to help instructors around the world.

Dr Zerrillo said proudly, "Currently our cases are being used on every continent, other than Antarctica – but if they ever open a university there, we will be there."

In 2012, Dr Zerrillo's team started an online journal, *Perspectives*, that is published every month. Its purpose is to keep alumni, current students and other stakeholders informed about the depth of scholarship that the University is involved in.

"We interview faculty members and ask them to talk about their research and why it is important. If a Nobel Prize winner comes to campus, we spend a bit of time with him," he said.

The Centre also published its first magazine, *Asian Management Insights*, earlier this year. The biannual publication discusses Asian business trends, innovations and best practices, and is aimed at senior business executives.

It featured an interview on ethics and values with Indian businessman Ratan Tata, who was the former chair of India's mega-conglomerate Tata Group. Other articles talked about how to unleash creativity in a cross-cultural environment, data analytics, how Kraft marketed its Oreo cookies in China, and the wealth management industry in Singapore.

Dr Zerrillo said, "We plan to make the magazine the *Harvard Business Review* of Asia, tackling Asian issues and Asian stories, for Asian managers."

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**– Philip Charles Zerrillo, Singapore Management University's executive director of its Centre for Management Practice and Case Writing Initiative**

### Faculty development

Another big part of Dr Zerrillo's work involves the training of faculty from SMU and abroad.

At the end of this month, the Centre is taking 24 faculty members to Vietnam for a few days. There, they will meet government officials, academics and business people to get a better feel of what is happening on the ground. Other trips are scheduled to Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila.

"This raises the global intelligence of our faculty. Our advantage is not going to be what we know about Asia, in particular South-east Asia," Dr Zerrillo said.

"If they take the trip on their own, they are not going to see the same level of contacts, and there's nobody to talk to or share insights with. The hope is that they can think about problems in a cross disciplinary way, across social sciences, law, and so on."

He is also trying to get more faculty members to go out to work in the corporate world for a few months in "corporate immersions". The reverse also works: he hopes high-potential candidates from the corporate world can be "executives-in-residence" on campus to teach and do research with faculty members.

The Centre for Management Practice also runs workshops teaching faculty members how to write case studies, and how to teach case studies, facilitate discussions, and coach executives.

Another initiative is the two-week Certificate of Management Education course, targeted at faculty members from other universities in the region.

"A lot of developing nations' universities don't have enough instructors," he explained.

"We are putting programmes together to instruct their people on how to instruct. We have run case writing and teaching workshops in Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and even Kazakhstan."

### Corporate outreach

SMU is also engaging businesses in Singapore and beyond. Initiatives include offering faculty consulting services to small and medium sized enterprises, potentially funded by a SPRING Singapore grant.

Starting this year, the University is also reaching out to retiring Singapore Armed Forces personnel who plan to embark on their second career.

Its SMU Warriors Scholarship sponsors up to 20 bond-free postgraduate scholarships annually for three years, at a total cost of about S\$1 million a year. Applicants must be Singapore citizens with at least 10 years of full-time military service. Current students include colonels and a one-star general, Dr Zerrillo noted.

"We could build in more capacity in some

programmes and thought it was a good thing we should be doing for the sake of nation-building," he said.

The Centre is also starting a series of industry initiatives in the fields of healthcare, leadership and sustainability. Corporate executives will be brought in to talk about industry issues, and faculty members can write up cases to be used in the classroom. For example, Dr Zerrillo is currently writing an article spun off from an EMBA student project to improve the waiting times of heart patients at hospitals.

Ultimately, Dr Zerrillo believes that faculty members should always stay connected to the outside world. "Why do I do all this stuff? It's to push our faculty to the edge of practice, to do what's relevant for society. This helps the efficiency of the country and the region, and this is the vision for the Centre," he said.

Looking ahead, he expects that SMU will pursue even more outreach activities locally as well as in the region. It recently ran a week-long programme for university programme directors from Kazakhstan on how to manage universities efficiently. It is working with Singapore's Workforce Development Agency to run seminars on case writing. A site to distribute its 100 case studies for S\$7 per download is going live. Concurrently, he is talking to broadcast media companies on content distribution.

The Centre is also working on a few book projects, including one for Singapore's 50th anniversary next year that traces the corporate culture and identity of household names such as Keppel Corp and SMRT.

He is proud of what his Centre – and its small but dedicated team of seven staff – can do. "I have a PhD in marketing but I've always been a businessman at heart," he said. "Some of the things we do might not be successful, others will be very successful. The Centre has been a game changer for the University."

This is a monthly thought leadership series brought to you by the Singapore Management University. Next month's feature will examine the use of unstructured data analytics in managing corporate fraud detection.

**GET INTO THE MINDS OF ASIA'S THOUGHT LEADERS.**

SMU aspires to be the hub for thought leadership in Asia. Fully committed to shaping a new generation of professionals who truly understand Asia, we have already published more than 100 insightful case studies on Asian businesses in a mere three years. Our first published magazine, *Asian Management Insights* (AMI), aims to develop a body of knowledge on Asian business trends, innovations and best practices. It brings together the best of Asia's thought leaders and explores their solutions to current global challenges.

Read about Ratan Tata's views on business ethics and values, Oreo cookie's marketing strategy in China and more in our inaugural issue of AMI.

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