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SMU Emerges Sole Winner Among More Than 100 Teams at Prestigious Gobi Desert Challenge

SMU clinches Model Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Team Award



Caption: Led by Professor Zhang Liandong, Dean of the SMU School of Accountancy and School of Accountancy DBA Programme Lead Ms Liu Fei, the 14-member team brought together entrepreneur-doctoral participants from the SMU-ZJU Doctor of Business Administration in Accounting and Finance programme.

Singapore, 8 May 2026 – The Singapore Management University (SMU) – Zhejiang University Doctor of Business Administration (SMU-ZJU DBA) (Accounting and Finance) team has become SMU's first team to complete the renowned Gobi Desert Challenge, (or "Gobi to West") with SMU emerging as the **sole recipient of the event's Model Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Team Award** among more than 100 participating teams from leading business schools and executive cohorts across the region.

Led by **SMU's School of Accountancy**, the 14-member team completed a demanding 58-kilometre trek across the Gobi Desert, earning recognition for exemplary environmental stewardship, teamwork and thought leadership on sustainability.

Widely regarded as one of the most prestigious endurance events in the Greater China EMBA and DBA circuit, the four-day challenge brings together senior executives, entrepreneurs and doctoral candidates to test resilience, leadership and collaboration under extreme desert conditions. This year's edition centred on the theme of ESG and "business for good".

The award recognised the SMU team's systematic ESG practice under real-world conditions. Over four days, in temperatures up to 30°C and across rugged terrain requiring close coordination with participants from more than 40 institutions, the team translated sustainability principles into action.

The event organisers also cited SMU for integrating academic research into the endurance challenge, noting the team's professional contributions to the ongoing development of the event's ESG framework. The SMU team comprised 14 entrepreneur-doctoral participants and alumni who simultaneously lead businesses while pursuing doctoral research, reflecting the programme's emphasis on combining academic rigour with practical leadership.

The award citation further commended the team for its "leave-no-trace" approach to minimising environmental impact, its organisation of inter-school exchanges to foster friendship and promote ESG principles, and its contributions to advancing the challenge's sustainability framework.

"To emerge as the sole winner in this category among more than 100 teams is a significant achievement and a strong affirmation of SMU's commitment to translating sustainability principles into action," said **Professor Liandong Zhang, Dean of SMU School of Accountancy**, who led the team and was invited to serve as flag-off official for the event's competitive 121-kilometre race.

"The Gobi challenged us to practise environmental, social and governance principles in one of the toughest possible settings. After 58 km, the biggest challenge was not physical endurance but mental resilience: steeling your resolve and continuing across the harsh desert terrain. Just like running a business or leading a team, one must make responsible decisions, support one another, and stay true to shared values under pressure," reflected participant **Wang Yi (SMU-ZJU DBA, class of 2025), Huatai United Securities, Managing Director**.

Beyond the trek, Professor Zhang and SMU-ZJU DBA alumni contributed to the event's intellectual programme through a talk and panel discussion on artificial intelligence, exchanging insights with senior executives and doctoral participants from business schools across Asia.

This achievement further strengthens SMU's standing within the regional executive education community and underscores the University's leadership in cultivating purpose-driven leaders who combine scholarship with real-world impact.

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About the Singapore Management University (SMU) – Zhejiang University Doctor of Business Administration (SMU-ZJU DBA) (Accounting and Finance) Programme

The SMU-ZJU Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) (Accounting and Finance) programme is a partnership between SMU School of Accountancy and Zhejiang University School of Management. The programme is designed for scholars and senior management who aspire to pursue practice-driven research with the potential to create business impact. On top of research training, DBA candidates will examine the industrial applications of theory through coursework and develop pedagogical competencies through specialised workshops. Candidates will develop a portfolio of skills required for influencing management practice; conducting applied and field research; and teaching effectively, with a specialisation in the field of Accounting and Finance.

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