



Mr Evan Heng plonked \$100,000 of his savings into starting Zenith Learning Group on the day that he completed his national service less than four years ago. From having two teachers and 160 students when he opened his first centre in Buona Vista in 2019, he now has four centres, 90 staff and more than 2,000 students annually. Last year, Zenith's revenue was \$6.7 million. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

WongKimHohMeets

# Undergrad behind education business that rakes in \$6.7m

Evan Heng wants Zenith Learning Group to eventually be able to help students navigate the educational landscape from pre-school to tertiary level



**Wong Kim Hoh**  
Deputy Life Editor

Evan Heng is a young man with big ambitions.

"My dream," says the 25-year-old student-entrepreneur of an education business, "is to become my own version of a super app."

He wants, he continues earnestly, to build an education ecosystem.

"What that means is that from the time you're five years old, all the way to the day that you get your first job, my company will be supporting you every step of the way."

A third-year student at NUS Business School as well as the founder and chief executive of Zenith Learning Group, he has already mapped it all out.

In a nutshell, the enterprise he wants to build will have the capabilities and structures – from physical centres to online platforms to learning apps – to help students navigate the educational landscape from pre-school to tertiary level.

"By the time they finish junior college or polytechnic after going through the entire ecosystem, I would have collected enough data to help them discover what they excel in and recommend university courses they would do

well in," he says.

It's not all about big money, though. A firm believer in social capitalism, Mr Heng also wants to plough back profits from his core business of tuition centres to launch a free-to-use online learning platform so that everyone aged between seven and 18 – not just in Singapore but also the rest of South-east Asia – can receive a world-class education.

If his achievements are any indication, it won't be a pipe dream.

A teaching wunderkind who could make \$10,000 a month teaching economics to junior college students while serving national service, he plonked \$100,000 of his savings into starting Zenith 3½ years ago.

From having two teachers and 160 students when he opened his first centre in Buona Vista in 2019, he now has four centres (with two more opening in March), 90 staff (including more than 40 teachers) and more than 2,000 students annually.

Last year, Zenith's revenue was \$6.7 million.

His triumphs are all the more laudable since he had to juggle full-time studies with not just running but also growing the business during a pandemic.

Well spoken, effervescent and intelligent with an affecting sense of derring-do, Mr Heng is the second of three children. His father is a former Microsoft executive who now runs a process management consultancy and spends a lot of time doing missionary work. His mother, who has two master's degrees, gave up her job in the civil service to raise her children, but now works as a social worker.

The Fairfield Methodist alumnus says he was a decent but "not very well-behaved" student who ran a thriving business selling boomerangs made from

ice-cream sticks and rubber bands or trading in Pokemon cards during primary and secondary school.

The late bloomer found his footing in junior college. One of a handful of H3 students – the H3 programme, among other things, allows top students to study subjects at an advanced level in university – he was active in muay thai and floorball at Anglo-Chinese Junior College.

He shocked all his friends when, with his parents' blessings, he decided to take a gap year after his first year to find himself.

"I've always been very forward-thinking and when I was in junior college, I started to ask myself questions like, 'What does it mean to live? Do you live for experiences or memories, or to make a good career?'"

In that one year, he burned through his savings. He travelled a lot, did a lot of mixed martial arts, took part in an overseas frisbee tournament in Bali and really explored the world.

"There was no 'snap moment', but that process of really trying to understand myself better made me realise that what made me happy was, as generic as it sounds, helping others. I derive happiness from people's happiness."

A trip with his parents to the Auschwitz museum and memorial in Poland left a deep and sobering impression.

"I felt that I was very blessed. I lived in a very safe, secure city with parents who didn't have to worry too much about money. All those things I saw there – although it's not at the same level, there are other people suffering from the same issues and problems today. It made me think that there's so much more people in my position can do, but yet, there are not enough people doing anything that is of impact."

He understood himself a lot better when he got back, but still had no idea what he wanted to do for a career.

Serendipity, however, gave him a nudge. His classmates, he says, used to always ask him how he did so well when he studied so little.

"I found the best way to learn



Mr Heng with Zenith employees at Mount Batur in Bali during a company retreat last month. PHOTO: COURTESY OF EVAN HENG



Mr Heng with some of his students at the Buona Vista centre in 2019. Zenith has two more centres opening in March. PHOTO: COURTESY OF EVAN HENG

JOY IN SERVING OTHERS

**That process of really trying to understand myself better made me realise that what made me happy was, as generic as it sounds, helping others.**



MR EVAN HENG, on the gap year he took after his first year of junior college to find himself.

UNDERSTANDING GRATITUDE

**The key to success in Singapore is not to have more, it's to want less.**



MR HENG

was to teach others, because if I could explain something in a very clear, lucid manner to someone else, then what's stopping me from doing the same in my exams, right?" says Mr Heng, who used to conduct economics sessions for his classmates in the canteen during his second year in junior college.

Word spread after he graduated. As luck would have it, he tore his hamstring just before enlisting for his NS, delaying it for six months. Feeling a little blue and bored, he decided to take on 14 students, teaching only economics and charging each student just \$20 an hour because he felt he didn't have the experience.

After between six and nine months with him, 11 of them got As.

"I was honestly a little shocked at how well I did," says Mr Heng, who spent all his weekends the following year teaching 60 students – in groups of eight – in the kitchen of his home.

Although many asked for private sessions, he rejected all save one who had learning issues.

The student's father had offered to pay Mr Heng what he would earn in a group session. In two months, Mr Heng helped the student earn a B.

"The first year made me think that I was a good teacher, the second year helped me realise that it might be a calling. Think about it this way – because of me, they could get into the school of their dreams. Then parents started texting me, like, 'Thank you so much for helping my kid get the scholarship.'"

He decided that education would be his career, even though he had already saved \$100,000 and secured a place to study geography at University College London. He also had plans to come back to Singapore to do a master's in law after that.

"The No. 1 determining factor was actually regret. I felt that if I went overseas, I would regret it because I would never know what could've happened if I had stayed in Singapore. But if I stayed and it didn't work out, I could always go overseas."

The prospect of making a big and tangible impact also excited him.

"I didn't just want to teach 200 students a year. I wanted to see if I could replicate my success with other teachers, and teach them how to teach others so that we could get thousands of students every single year," he says.

On the day that he was discharged from the army, he took a taxi to Raffles Place, incorporated Zenith and, inspired by Soviet-born American entrepreneur and Internet personality Gary Vee, did away with a safety net by plonking the \$100,000 into a business account.

"He said if you have a safety net, you'll never give it 100 per cent."

And go all out he did in the last 3½ years. He attributes his success to honesty, transparency, his ability to adapt and his customer obsession.

"Since Day 1, our focus has been on how to maximise the amount of value for the students and their parents. I knew that if I just give all the value, they will give me back," says Mr Heng, who, in addition to free and discounted lessons, also stocks his centres with food, coffee machines and even massage chairs.

He also bans his teachers and staff from doing sales.

"If they need it they sign up, if they don't need it, we don't pressure them. As much as financials and other things are important, ethics must come above all, and we must be very honest and transparent. People are smart. I think too many businesses treat their customers like idiots," he says.

A big part of the equation, of course, are the teachers whom Mr Heng hires personally. Among them is a PhD holder and the former head of the science department of one of the biggest education companies in Singapore.

"The average salary of a full-time tutor who teaches with us for at least one year is about \$16,000 a month. I have a 24-year-old who makes \$24,000 a month. I'm constantly on the lookout for good teachers," says Mr Heng, whose tutors work on a commission model.

He talks excitedly about the tech group he has assembled – from animators producing videos to tutors designing curriculum – to work on his free learning platform, built with profits from his tuition centres.

"This business model is profitable, scalable and sustainable, but at the same time has the largest scale of social impact – because I'm literally taking the world-class education that Singapore has, that people pay thousands and thousands a month for, and making it free of charge. No catch."

Not surprisingly, many venture capitalists have come calling; he has even been asked to take Zenith public. He declines to say more except that he is weighing his options and deciding which offer dovetails with his vision.

He is a bit bummed he is not in a relationship – "something I hope to change this year" – but he is otherwise very happy.

"The reason why Singaporeans are so unhappy is that they don't understand gratitude. The key to success in Singapore is not to have more, it's to want less. And when I look at my life right now, I'm like, damn, my life is good right."

kimhoh@sph.com.sg

**SCAN TO WATCH**  
He turned a passion for education into a \$6.7m business.  
<https://str.sg/wkh22>

