

TAKING HEART

Smiling Gecko's campus in Cambodia offers opportunities for community impact

NUS is looking to make a study trip to the facility a recurring feature for participants of its Distinguished Senior Fellowship. **BY LINDSAY WONG**

IN SEPTEMBER, a motley group of 25 – among them a former chief executive and senior executives from a range of companies across industry sectors – got on a plane headed for Cambodia. Specifically, they were going to the campus of the Smiling Gecko, a privately run school and vocational facility about 60 km north-east of Phnom Penh.

The 25, having already built careers in the corporate world, were each looking to shape a post-professional identity, one centred on running a project that would make an impact on the community.

These programme participants had already put in 13 weeks of classes under the National University of Singapore's Distinguished Senior Fellowship Programme (NUS DSFP), and this week-long study trip was when they would put those management lessons into practice in real life.

The Smiling Gecko, founded in 2014, hopes to show them the way, having helped more than 25,000 people in its community. It tackles poverty in rural Cambodia by giving the villagers tools – education and vocational training – so they can be self-reliant.

It runs a school for more than 500 students up until seventh grade, and offers vocational training for adults – to train them for jobs in hospitality, carpentry or farming, for example.

Smiling Gecko runs the Farmhouse Resort & Spa and a social enterprise that provides jobs for those who have completed training. It also runs a platform through which these villagers sell



The Farmhouse Resort & Spa, located on Smiling Gecko's campus, employs and trains locals in a range of job skills.

their products; some work on the farms, which supply food products to Phnom Penh.

During the week, the DSFP participants worked alongside the local community, helping out with fish farming and learning about waste management, for example. They also toured the non-profit's 150-hectare campus, which comprises the school, resort, greenhouses and cultural centre.

Professor Virginia Cha, academic director of DSFP, said in a post on NUS' website that the week-long study trip gave the participants opportunities to, for instance, practise social-impact communication in a real-life setting.

"The trip will forge a strong community and encourage reflection as the fellows... explore purpose projects together. They can

be inspired on the impact they want to make with their own purpose projects," she said.

Dr Tan Kok Heng, one of the programme participants and previously chief executive of Sunway RE Capital, said: "What began as a humanitarian initiative has evolved into an end-to-end impact enterprise that integrates education, agriculture, craftsmanship, hospitality and social entrepreneurship."

Breaking the poverty cycle

Another participant, Stephen Keys, co-founder of The Wisdom Vault, said he would apply the lessons learned to IFS Foundation, a charity he chairs that gives children in rural Sri Lanka access to education.

Smiling Gecko was founded by former photographer Hannes



The participants of the National University of Singapore's Distinguished Senior Fellowship Programme at the Smiling Gecko campus during their study trip in September. PHOTOS: SMILING GECKO

Schmid to take youth off the streets – away from the grasp of begging syndicates – and put them into an environment where they could pick up skills that would earn them an income so they can break out of the poverty cycle.

Robin Pho, Smiling Gecko's board director and Singapore lead, said: "It started with putting kids into school and making sure that they had a quality education."

Those children at the school now learn English and Khmer and have three meals a day at the cost of US\$10 per child. Donors fund the majority of the expenses,

which cover the running of music rooms, computer labs and a sports field.

Some of the adults who are trained at Smiling Gecko find jobs outside the campus. "We don't want them living in a bubble," said Pho. "The idea is to train them so that they can work in the city, other parts of Cambodia or even overseas."

Future plans

In the long term, Smiling Gecko aims to build a university focused on applied sciences and continue expanding its school.

The Singapore chapter of Smiling Gecko was set up last year to raise awareness about rural communities in Cambodia, and how corporates and schools in Singapore can help.

Pho hopes to build more partnerships to drive community impact. NUS is looking to make the study trip a recurring feature of its DSFP.

He added: "NUS DSFP found that there was a good connection to Smiling Gecko in regard to the meaning of the programme."

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