

Story of Zambian solar energy company wins global case study competition

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The Case Writing Centre of the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business, (UCT GSB) has, for the second consecutive year, been named among the winners in the annual Case Writing Competition of the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD), taking top honours in the 2018 African Business Cases category.

The Centre won the award for a teaching case study on Vitalite, a Zambian company that operates “at the intersection” of solar energy technology and mobile money in that country. The winning case was authored by Vimendree Perumal and Peter Munthali, both MBA graduates from the GSB; Professor Ralph Hamann, research director at the GSB; Vitalite co-founder Dr John Fay; as well as Sarah Boyd of the GSB Case Writing Centre.

Fay co-founded Vitalite soon after he completed his PhD at the GSB under Hamann’s supervision. The first products released by the company – whose stated mission is “to make quality products and services accessible and affordable to all Zambian households” – were standalone solar lights and energy efficient stoves. Vitalite has since introduced Zambia’s first Pay-As-You-Go (PAYGO) Solar Home System, making electricity affordable at much lower income levels.

It was Hamann who first proposed that Vitalite be developed as a teaching case study for MBA students, with first Perumal and, later, Munthali working on it as their main research projects during their MBA. Their two studies were combined in the teaching case study written up with Boyd.

Today, Hamann uses it on the course he teaches on the MBA: Business, Government, and Society, specifically in a session on innovation. “Vitalite has been a fabulous company to study and discuss in our classes,” he says. “The case shows why and how founders may continuously question and recreate their business model to achieve their economic and social aspirations in challenging contexts.”

Moreover, it provides a number of important additional themes for classroom discussion, he explains. These include the hurdles faced by businesses operating in areas of limited statehood; and the challenges of running a hybrid enterprise, i.e. one that has both social and financial objectives.

Putting together a teaching case of a multi-layered award-winning pedigree is demanding, Hamann adds. The challenges include collecting sufficient data that are rich and reliable, making sense of that data, writing up the case study, and then revisiting and re-editing it numerous times until it fits the bill. In this case, it meant that both Perumal and Munthali had to travel to Zambia to embed themselves in the company. From these initial findings they had to fashion a compelling storyline that focuses on key learning objectives of the case.

The Vitalite teaching case also benefitted from different perspectives brought to it by Perumal and Munthali. “It’s an interesting and valuable case because it’s been researched consecutively by different students – so the data collection has a continuation. That presents a rare opportunity,” notes Claire Barnardo, who heads the GSB Case Writing Centre. The Centre is a recent addition to the school and was established specifically to develop and publish African-focused teaching case studies that are relevant to business in the sometimes unique and often confounding contexts of emerging markets.

The GSB Case Writing Centre’s current collection consists of 34 teaching cases published since its inception in 2017. In addition to the wins in the EFMD African Business Cases category, GSB teaching cases have also been awarded top prizes in the 2017 African Governance Showcase Competition and the 2017 Emerald/Association of African Business Schools (AABS) Case Study Competition, and featured among the top 10 teaching cases of the 2018 international CEEMAN/Emerald Case Writing Competition.

The EFMD is a global non-profit organisation dedicated to management development, and serves as internationally recognised accreditation body for business schools, business school programmes and corporate universities. Each year, it presents awards across 17 categories in its Case Writing Competition. The event aims to provide useful insights into the internal practices of the profiled companies, while also reflecting social and economic changes from all across the globe that serve as practical teaching and learning material.

Some 550 submitted cases vied for the 17 category awards in 2018.

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