

Filling the gap in world-wide education

Social enterprise The Global Citizen caters to the region's market for niche academic co-curricular activities. **BY PRISCA ANG**

AFTER six years of debating, Walter Yeo tried to find work as a debate coach, but was surprised to find the jobs filled by insurance agents and fitness trainers.

"A lot of them weren't debaters themselves and didn't know much about debate. Yet, they believed that they could teach it because they had experience in speaking to members of the public," he said.

From his encounter, the 25-year-old realised that schools lacked qualified debate coaches. Together with his friend Jared Yeo, 26, he started The Global Citizen (TGC), a Singapore-based education provider, in December 2015 to address this shortage.

TGC caters to Singapore's niche academic co-curricular services market. It has also actively expanded its regional footprint by partnering schools and travel intermediaries in Asia. Earlier this year, it inked a five-figure deal with a top private school which offers an international curriculum in Hanoi, Vietnam.

"We founded TGC to bridge the gap in co-curricular education. It is often difficult for schools to find training firms, and we aim to be a one-stop shop for academic co-curricular activities," said Walter, who is also director for debate at TGC.

The social enterprise has more than 10 coaches, who have won at least one major national or international championship during their respective debate careers.

To date, TGC has more than a dozen clients for its debate business in Singapore. These include Singapore Chinese Girls' School, Nan Hua Primary School, North Oaks Primary School, Raffles Girls' Primary School and ITE College West.

Debate is beneficial for students, as it increases their awareness of issues which affect everyone, said Samuel Myat San, 36, founder of Singapore Orators, which also offers debate programmes. He has coached debate for 16 years.

"It forces people to look at issues from an angle they would otherwise have not considered. It teaches them to defend a certain point of view, and communicate it clearly to others, which requires empathy."

Apart from debate coaching, TGC offers leadership and "global citizenship" camps, which are also significant growth drivers for the startup. These camps, which draw a range of 30 to 100 participants each, teach students about important global issues such as environmental preservation, social justice, law, politics and public health.

"We're helping students to develop global skills, and realise that the world is much bigger than them," said Jared, who heads curriculum design and is TGC's global citizenship director.

In addition, the firm has widened its range of services. It offers public speaking workshops, coding classes, as well as interview and university admission preparation courses through



Starting out with debate coaching, Mr Jared Yeo (left) and Mr Walter Yeo also want to teach students about global issues such as protecting the environment, social justice, law, politics and public health.

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Walter Yeo on being surprised to find insurance agents and fitness trainers working as debate coaches in schools.

its subsidiary company the Impres-sionist.

Going global

TGC's team consists of more than 60 employees, which comprise full-time, part-time and freelance staff. Beyond local shores, it has a presence in China and Vietnam, its most active foreign markets, and where its upcoming offices will be situated.

In addition, it runs programmes in Malaysia, Taiwan and Japan; and its revenue has grown by 36 times since it opened.

TGC's big break came last August, when it partnered a top-tier private school in Zhejiang, China, to create structured debate lessons. In mid-April, it signed another deal with a Chinese public school to bring over more educational programmes.

It has also tied up with a Singapore-based educational travel agency

to include its programmes within schools' itineraries.

Another milestone was TGC's partnership with a top school in Vietnam, where it runs both debate workshops and "global citizenship" camps.

Plans in the pipeline include a learning centre, which will be built by this August within the school as part of the Vietnamese government's effort to develop an EduPark. The firm aims to hire local Vietnamese talent to help manage its sessions there.

Walter described the business as a social enterprise, because it believes in keeping the barriers of entry to education low, while providing quality services.

"We have built TGC as a social platform. We can't teach students to give back to society if we don't," he said.

Hitting the books

Despite the firm's successes, its

founders have faced their share of challenges. Both Walter and Jared are full-time students at Yale-NUS College. This means they have to run TGC and manage their studies concurrently, even when they are on business trips.

"Sometimes, we touch down on the morning of an exam and we have to rush back to school," said Walter, who is pursuing a double-degree in Law and Liberal Arts from the National University of Singapore and Yale-NUS College.

Added Walter: "If you want to do a lot of work, some things, such as our social life, have to give. You have to be disciplined and figure out what's important to you."

Meanwhile, Jared had to manage the startup's camps and curriculum development while far from home, as he went on a student exchange in the US last year.

"It helps that we know what we want, because we have an end goal and we work towards it," said Jared, who is a global affairs major at Yale-NUS.

Furthermore, as it was a two-man show, they had to rope in staff with the right expertise quickly. Fortunately, they are happy with their team, as "it is easier to steer a small ship", said Walter.

In terms of funding, TGC had initial capital of several thousand dollars, which came entirely from its founders' personal savings. It focused on keeping initial costs low, so that it could be profitable from an early stage and "develop meaningfully as a social enterprise", said Walter.

It is currently exploring venture capital investments. It has already received an offer in the six-figure range, but turned it down as the investor's interests were not aligned with the firm's.

"Our bottom line is positive, and we are making healthy profit margins. Funding would be very helpful, but it's not entirely necessary," said Walter.

Looking ahead, TGC is trying to develop a stronger global presence. It hopes to become a hub in South-east Asia for niche academic co-curricular activities within the next five years.

Added Walter: "Debate really changed my life as it made me more confident. We hope to have a similar impact with our services, and we believe that people see the value in what we're doing."

■ The writer was an ex-intern with *The Business Times*.