Non-profit, not unprofessional

SMU centre aims to align charity sector's financial needs and altruistic goals

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SINGAPORE'S non-profit sector, which has taken a beating following the National Kidney Foundation (NKF) fall-out, will be given a much-needed boost with a new centre at the Singapore Management University (SMU) dedicated to promoting the industry and making it more professional.

The Lien Foundation Centre for Social Innovation will focus on three areas — research, teaching and community outreach — to encourage more participation and better management in the non-profit sector.

The first of its kind in Asia, it may even potentially offer a course drawing lessons from the NKF saga. Speaking in his capacity as governor of the Lien Foundation and chairman of the centre's board, Mr Gerard Ee (picture), who is also chairman of the NKF, said the timing was entirely incidental.

"We started planning this about 10 months ago, so this was before the NKF saga. The religious-minded may even call it divine intervention that this has worked out," he said.

Electives in social entrepreneurship will be offered to SMU students, while the centre will also offer special modules and executive programmes for professionals in the sector.

As Associate Professor Annie Koh — the Associate Dean of the university's Lee Kong Chian School of Business — put it, passion alone isn't enough: "Organisations need management skills to sustain themselves."

To start with, the centre will try to fill the research and knowledge gap to give students and professionals the tools they need to work in the sector.

Said Lee Kong Chian School of Business Assoc Prof Tan Wee Liang, who will take on the position of director at the new centre: "Can business students major in social entrepreneurship and innovation so that they can eventually work in the non-profit sector? How do you bring together business needs as well as social issues within such an organisation? It's a new area, so there's been very little research done on it."

The primary goal: Making the sector more professional, with better managed organisations catering to different needs.

Mr Ee explained: "If we want to be recognised as a civilised and mature society, how much we practice social responsibility will matter. But non-profit organisations can't start from a position of poverty and lack. They have to be managed professionally, with proper cost analysis, and offer services for people who can afford it."

"For those who can't afford it, that's where charities come in."

For its part, the Lien Foundation, which will be donating $6 million over a five-year period to fund the centre, believes the collaboration will make for more effective policies.

"Nobody has done a proper evaluation of what the best practices are, or a needs analysis-based study. Organisations aren't able to share their knowledge with each other. This move will strengthen the governance of the non-profit sector," said Mr Laurence Lien, who is governor of the Lien Foundation.

To start with, a module on the NKF may be in the works. Said Mr Ee: "The NKF experience certainly could be a good basis for a case study, allowing people to learn how to design a system that is workable in terms of corporate governance, or develop a whole philosophy for a board to learn how to have better practices."

Quipped Assoc Prof Tan: "I'll have to go through the 400-odd pages of the report on the NKF and then look into designing a course from there."