

SA case study takes story of township entrepreneurial success to the world

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A UCT Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) teaching case study on how an entrepreneurial township business is uplifting communities around South Africa has been shortlisted in the 2018 CEEMAN Case Writing Competition.

When Luvuyo Rani and his brother Lonwabo started a tiny information and communication technologies (ICT) business selling refurbished computers from the boot of his car in 2004, he little knew what lay ahead. Today, Silulo Ulutho Technologies is a company with more than 46 stores, 21 franchises and 220 employees around South Africa that is making a difference in the lives of thousands of South Africans.

Silulo's remarkable business success has now been captured in a case study – written up by the UCT Graduate School of Business – that has been shortlisted out of more than 38 case studies from 17 countries from around the world in the prestigious 2018 CEEMAN Case Writing Competition.

In a first for South Africa, the teaching case study has also been translated into isiXhosa in order to make it more accessible – especially to other aspiring township entrepreneurs.

“There are not many business school case studies that look at entrepreneurship that has a social impact and this is where Silulo Ulutho Technologies really stands out,” says Claire Barnardo, UCT GSB Case Writing Centre Manager.

“Entrepreneurship with a focus on inclusion and social impact is tougher to take on, it requires grit and resilience. Silulo is a shining example of upliftment as well as good business principles.”

Written by Eckard Smuts, Sophia Campello Beckwith, Ncedisa Nkonyeni, Ella Scheepers and Dr François Bonnici, former director of the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship at the UCT GSB, the case study is one of two UCT GSB case studies that made it in the top nine of the CEEMAN Case Writing Competition.

“The story of Silulo Ulutho Technologies is a home-grown success story that can inform a new academic paradigm for African business schools – rather than relying on academic theories imported from the West to tell us how to innovate,” says principal researcher Eckard Smuts.

Smuts says working on the study opened his eyes to what entrepreneurship was really all about – especially in the inadequately serviced areas that Silulo operates in. “They had to defy the odds every step of the way, fighting to set up their businesses in townships when no-one gave them a chance and they constantly had to defy expectations of failure.”

The case study also explores how Silulo was able to adapt its business model as internet access increased along with the introduction of smartphones in the townships. The company started offering more business-related services as well as business partnerships and mentoring and networking platforms along with computer-related training courses. The guiding principle of all their services is always to uplift the community. Study case co-author, Ncedisa Nkonyeni, adds, “These entrepreneurs have a more embedded understanding of relevance and a more collectivist approach to their role in the community and towards their clients.”

Even after numerous awards and significant financial return, Rani along with his brother and Nandipha Matshoba, who are both partners in the business, continue to help others through securing loans for individuals to open franchises, mentoring young entrepreneurs and creating networks for other businesspeople to succeed. In 2018, the company also opened the Silulo Business Incubation Hub in Mitchells Plain, to help young entrepreneurs in various aspects of setting up and launching their business.

Rani says it was an honour and a privilege for the company to be selected as the subject of the case study. “The impact of what we have done and achieved and the fact that it can be read in isiXhosa is very exciting for us, it means it reaches a much bigger audience.”

The wider academic significance of teaching case studies like this one is also important to Barnardo. “This case study is part of a new wave of learning materials that we are putting together at the UCT GSB, showing business students successful role models in business in a local context. This story will go on to inspire and prepare future business leaders. It is Afro-centric and promotes a collective approach to business.”

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