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## Media Release

### **SMU launches Urban Institute focused on the study of Asian cities**

***New institute will craft a multi- and interdisciplinary research agenda organised around the key themes of Urban Infrastructure, Urban Growth and Urban Life***

*Singapore, 17 January 2024 (Wednesday)* - As Asian cities urbanise at an unprecedented rate, urban policy-makers face the increasingly complex and pressing challenge of balancing urban growth with resilience and sustainability. With migration and the rapid flow of ideas online, old and new city-making practices have become uncomfortably entwined, resulting in contestation for space, resources, and municipal services.

In response to megatrends that underscore the critical need to prioritise urban research, Singapore Management University (SMU) today launched the [SMU Urban Institute](#) (UI), a new research institute dedicated to multi- and inter-disciplinary research on cities in Asia. SMU UI will look beyond the development of infrastructure, and consider as well the socio-cultural aspects of urbanisation, and the balance between urban growth and sustainability.

The SMU UI was inaugurated by **Ms Sim Ann, Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and National Development**. She congratulated SMU on the launch of a new Urban Institute dedicated to addressing the evolving challenges for urbanisation and urban planning in Asia. Although Singapore has overcome some of these pressures, she noted, the challenges are ever-evolving as urban pressures continue to grow, hence, it is important for cities to learn from one another, and explore collaborative solutions for sustainable urban development.

SMS Sim said, “In the early days of our independence, Singapore experienced acute urban challenges: overcrowding, slums, traffic congestion, environmental pollution, floods, and water shortages. These challenges remain pressing in many cities around the world even today. The urban solutions developed by Singapore are of interest to these cities, even as we learn and adapt good ideas from others. SMU’s Urban Institute will play an important role in promoting the exchange of experience and research between Singapore and our neighbours in Asia, and in helping policymakers and practitioners create better living environments for all.”

Helmed by **SMU Associate Professor of Geography Orlando Woods**, who is also Associate Dean (Research and Postgraduate Programmes) of the University’s College of Integrative Studies, SMU UI is the first research institute in Southeast Asia that aims to speak to the plethora of challenges facing Asia’s cities, from the heart of urban Asia. The SMU UI will address the sensory, socio-cultural and economic experiences of living in a city, the inequalities arising from wealth accumulation, and how infrastructure in terms of buildings, policy and regulation might limit or enable the growth of cities. It will play the role of an interface through which scholars, policymakers, communities and industry can come into meaningful contact and engagement with one another.

Noting the relevance and implications of the new institute, **SMU Chairman, Piyush Gupta**, said, “Our cities are facing unprecedented challenges, from demographic shifts due to migration to the rising demand for access to education and jobs. Moreover, the juxtaposition of old and new city-making

practices adds an additional layer of complexity. Considering these challenges, SMU Urban Institute will build on the university's mission to promote applied research that addresses societal problems by creating a hub for urban planners, designers, economists, social scientists, and policymakers to come together and collaboratively explore solutions. The recent upheavals caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical shifts only underscore the urgency of the research that will be conducted within these walls."

**SMU President, Professor Lily Kong**, said, "The Institute's establishment as a university-level entity signals our strong intention to extend beyond the confines of single disciplines and to forge collaborative multi- and interdisciplinary research."

"Our investment in establishing UI cannot be overstated," she added, "It is about undertaking deep, rigorous research to enhance our understanding of cities. But more than that, it is about laying the groundwork for liveable, resilient, and inclusive cities in Asia. As Asian cities grow at an unprecedented pace, the transformative potential of the UI becomes even more pronounced."

### Three research pillars of SMU Urban Institute

Spanning urban geography, urban and behavioural economics, public policy, operations management and geospatial data analytics, UI will consolidate SMU's existing urban-related research and generate new research directions. Taking an interdisciplinary research approach that bridges theoretical and applied research, data science and the critical social sciences, industry and the academy, it will focus its research on three pillars – 1. Urban Life, 2. Urban Growth, and 3. Urban Infrastructure. (Please refer to Annex 1).

**Assoc Prof Woods** said, "Whilst many urban planning and design models might draw on the examples of Western cities, it has become increasingly important to learn from the Asian urban experience to better understand how to address the challenges faced by our fast-growing cities. As cities grow in complexity, we need to take a human-centred approach as opposed to building more buildings and installing more infrastructure. SMU's new Urban Institute will place the tensions that are part of this Asian growth story at the forefront of our research agenda to provide better insights and solutions for a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable future for city-dwellers."

### Establishing global research partnerships, in Asia and beyond

Leveraging SMU's footprint in Singapore's city centre, UI will also develop urban research partnerships with global universities and think tanks. With the recent launch of SMU Overseas Centres in Indonesia and Thailand, the institute is already developing partnerships with like-minded collaborators in the region. It is also pursuing research collaborations further afield, with other Schools, institutes and initiatives focused on the study of cities.

SMU today also inked a Memorandum of Understanding with Thammasat University's Design School. Under the partnership agreement, SMU and Thammasat have agreed to facilitate the exchange of data, documentation and research materials; the exchange of students and researchers; as well as the joint organisation of seminars and symposiums. Looking ahead, SMU hopes to develop more partnerships with stakeholders in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, and beyond.

SMU UI is also in talks with the University of Melbourne (UniMelb) and the University of Toronto (UOT) on a variety of urban research collaborations. SMU and the Melbourne Centre for Cities are planning to partner in a joint event for ASEAN city leaders at the upcoming World Cities Summit in Singapore; while SMU and UOT have hosted a joint grant call to foster collaborative urban-related

research on the theme of “Migration, Thriving and Belonging”. These collaborations underpin the importance of sharing expertise, data and information with cities to learn from each other in a fast-changing urban landscape.

The SMU UI launch ceremony was followed by a panel discussion on “Sensing the City” which examined the human sensory experience of cities and how to reconcile the tension between human and digital forms of sensing for developing more liveable and human-centred cities.

The panel was moderated by Assoc Prof Woods, and featured Professor Jane Jacobs of Monash University, Indonesia; Mrs Rosa Daniel, Dean, Culture Academy, Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth; Mr Chiu Wen Tung, Group Director (Research & Development), Urban Redevelopment Authority; and Mr Luke Wu, Head of Innovation, Kajima Development.

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Enclosures:

- Annex 1 – Three research pillars of SMU Urban Institute
- Annex 2A – Speech by Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and National Development, Ms Sim Ann
- Annex 2B – Speech by SMU Chairman, Mr Piyush Gupta (audio file)
- Annex 2C – Speech by SMU President, Prof Lily Kong (audio file)
- Annex 2D – Speech by Director of SMU Urban Institute, Associate Professor of Geography Orlando Woods

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**About Singapore Management University**

Established in 2000, Singapore Management University (SMU) is recognised for its disciplinary and multi-disciplinary research that address issues of global relevance, impacting business, government, and society. Its distinctive education, incorporating innovative experiential learning, aims to nurture global citizens, entrepreneurs and change agents. With more than 13,000 students, SMU offers a wide range of bachelors, masters and PhD degree programmes in the disciplinary areas associated with six of its eight schools - Accountancy, Business, Economics, Computing, Law and Social Sciences. Its seventh school, the SMU College of Integrative Studies, offers a bachelor’s degree programme in deep, integrative interdisciplinary education. The College of Graduate Research Studies, SMU’s eighth school, enhances integration and interdisciplinarity across the various SMU postgraduate research programmes that will enable our students to gain a holistic learning experience and well-grounded approach to their research. SMU also offers a growing number of executive development and continuing education programmes. Through its city campus, SMU focuses on making meaningful impact on Singapore and beyond through its partnerships with industry, policymakers and academic institutions. [www.smu.edu.sg](http://www.smu.edu.sg)

**About the SMU Urban Institute**

Set up on 17 January 2024, the SMU Urban Institute plans to forge an interdisciplinary research agenda that bridges theoretical and applied research, data science and the critical social sciences, industry and academia, and Singapore and Southeast Asia. It seeks to synthesise and cultivate thought leadership and innovative solutions, inform policy decisions, and drive sustainable urban development practices for the development of more inclusive, resilient, and vibrant cities. Organised into three pillars – Urban Life, Urban Growth and Urban Infrastructure – it aims to address the evolving urban challenges that confront Singapore and key Asian cities. <https://urban.smu.edu.sg/>

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## Annex 1

### Three research pillars of SMU Urban Institute

Taking a multi- and interdisciplinary research approach that bridges theoretical and applied research, data science and the critical social sciences, industry and academia, in Singapore and Southeast Asia, SMU Urban Institute will focus its research on three pillars:

<b>Urban Life</b>	<b>Urban Growth</b>	<b>Urban Infrastructure</b>
<p>How are cities sensed and experienced? Explore what makes cities liveable or otherwise as it is important to understand how one experiences a city in a time of rapid urbanisation and migration to cities</p>	<p>How is value created and stored within cities? Examine how urban economies create new relationships of co-dependency as urbanisation grows, to address inequalities and challenges of urban growth amidst sustainability challenges.</p>	<p>How are cities enabled and constrained by their infrastructures? Explores how hard infrastructure (materials) and soft infrastructures (such as social, legal or regulatory constraints) affect urban development. The researchers will investigate resilience and evolution of infrastructures in response to environmental or social challenges.</p>
<p><i>An example of Urban Life research:</i></p> <p><b>Education Infrastructures and Migrant Un/Belonging:</b> Indian Students in Singapore. This project seeks to understand the role of “education infrastructures” in shaping the terms and extent of belonging amongst Indian migrants in Singapore.</p>	<p><i>An example of Urban Growth research:</i></p> <p><b>The ‘Other’ Garden City: Documenting Singapore’s Edible Gardening Heritage:</b> Spanning approximately 200 years of Singapore’s modern history, this study will draw upon a wide array of textual and non-textual historical and contemporary sources to document gardening in Singapore from the 19th century to the present day.</p>	<p><i>An example of Urban Infrastructure research:</i></p> <p><b>Technocratic Regionalism in Southeast Asia: The Translational Politics of Smart City Knowledge Transfer:</b> This project will explore the translational politics of smart city knowledge transfer, and how these politics implicate urban environments throughout Southeast Asia.</p>

For more examples of ongoing research, please visit <https://urban.smu.edu.sg/projects>