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Oral History Interview with Leong Kwong Sin: Conceptualising SMU

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Leong Kwong Sin

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

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Patricia Meyer: Today our narrator is Leong Kwong Sin and I'm Pat Meyer. It's the 13th of July. We're at the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library at Singapore Management University. And today's subject for the recording is your recollections and your perspective on the early days of SMU and your contributions and experiences in the early days of the School of Accountancy.

I'd like to start by going back to '96, 1997 when changes in university education were being discussed in Singapore, particularly changes at SIM [Singapore Institute of Management] and ask what you were doing then and how did you become involved with the third university?

Leong Kwong Sin: So in 1996, '97, that's the year that you mentioned, it was when the Government asked whether we, a group of us want to write a paper on the need for a third university in Singapore. And of course, a lot of us were very biased already because we have seen that there was a great need. In fact, I don't think we need much justification since I think the Government also knew. It's purely from the demographic in Singapore, although we are getting less babies but the number of people needing university education has increased. So it was quite easy to justify. It's more the form of the university that the Government wants. Of course, they did not put any constraint.

So a group of us, both academic as well as some outside people, were asked to form the task force and write the paper on the need for a third university in Singapore. As I said, that is an easy paper to, easy project to justify. Of course, we throw in ideas [on] what it should be. So even in the early years we look at the existing two universities and said, what else is necessary. So to jump the gun, ten years later it was very obvious that both existing universities have very great British, Australian influence as a matter of necessity because Singapore was a colony before. And some of us who have experienced education as well as having friends from European and American universities, see that it's good that Singapore may benefit from having a different type of university education. So that got put into the taskforce project quite early, American-type education and [the Singapore] Government seemed to be very happy with it. So that was the start of it.

Of course, SMU [Singapore Management University] was not named then as the third university. You mentioned SIM [Singapore Institute of Management]; that was a very pragmatic approach by the Government. At that time, the SIM had already been running for decades, right, providing what we called a second chance university experience for people who can't get into the university locally, whose family are not rich enough to send them overseas, unfortunately. So they were safe enough and then do a, read a university degree part-time through SIM. And I think there's a great necessity for that anyway, but the Government said that since they've been running for so long, why not just convert SIM into the third

university, so that was actually the original intention. That was not in our report. We just said that Singapore needs a third university. So when the proposal was accepted, and most of the task force members were faculty who volunteered to come up to form the third university, it is very natural the Government said that take a look at SIM. In fact, SIM was very helpful. They actually fund our first year of operation. Of course the Government did return, repay them later but it's an interest-free loan, I think it's good. So we are supposed to be SIM U [Singapore Institute of Management University], 'SEEMU', sounds a very funny name, right. Of course a lot of thing ran in parallel.

Some small group was asked to review the university programme run by SIM. They're mainly British, Australian degrees run in Singapore. I think that task force, that small group was led by Pang Yang Hoong who reviewed their programme, et cetera. Without going into detail, she produced a report and those things, and part of the outcome of it was that, the decision was made that SIM would not convert into the third university. The positive reason is that Singapore does need a second chance university. I think every country needs one because there are people who intellectually bloom slower or due to financial reason, you cannot deprive them of a chance of university education. To convert SIM into a third university, our statement is that then somebody [would] have to recreate another SIM, which is a total waste of time to create two universities rather than just do a whole new one. So we went away from that model. So, of course, later on, we know that SIM do create their own UNISIM [Singapore Institute of Management University] but they've been running university programme anyway for a long time.

And once we decide to, or rather Government decide that we should move away and start afresh, then we start eyeing and looking for role models from the US. By then as I said, it was already decided we should have an American-type model here to serve as a different type of outlet or avenue for students. So the choice of Wharton [School of the University of Pennsylvania] was also quite easy. They are the top university that has a substantial undergraduate programme, and they've always been ranked number one then, 1997, 1998, in the US, for business degree programme.

Our first BBM [Bachelor of Business Management] programme was actually structured quite closely to Wharton. It's not a direct import but quite closely. We look at what they have done, more the philosophy, because we want the American-style education which include broad-based, that's a word that's used a lot when we first market SMU where students are exposed to a lot more things than being super specialised from a very early age which is quite the British system. Whether it's fair to call it the British system or not, but at least the British system as manifest in Singapore. So we sign the five-year agreement with Wharton, the spice or rather the icing on it to get Wharton to agree, of course, is also a research MOU. They had to be fair. And out of that collaboration we learnt a lot from them as I've said. Personally I've gone to Wharton to visit them

for a couple of days, talk to about eight or nine people in the area that I am involved with in SMU at that time. Each of us visited different people to talk about different things.

Patricia Meyer:

I want to just ask, you mentioned some people were volunteered to be part of this effort, what did you see? Why did you decide to join this effort?

Leong Kwong Sin:

Can't speak for the rest, but I think there is a lot of similarity in personality among the core group. Most of the people are quite adventurous type, not the death-defying stunt type of adventure. Among the group, we come from NUS and NTU, more from NTU than NUS. I don't think it's by design, as I said, people [who] volunteer in that sense, are already running parts of the business programme in their respective university. Of the 12 of us who came, I think we're all deans, divisional heads, director of MBA programme, from both universities, NUS and NTU. And in some sense, we're all very comfortable, but comfort also create some form of boredom, so you can say that I used the word adventure because I think we are more or less bored to death running the same thing, that is quite successful. Both NUS and NTU has very good business and accountancy programmes, but then to do something new, especially from scratch is very attractive.

We're saying that, "What type of programme would be really good for Singapore and to be more selfishly, for our kids?" That's one of the phrases we bounce around. We said that, "We would like to design a university programme that we will send our kids." I think that actually borne itself out later. Quite a lot of SMU faculty and staff send their children to SMU for whatever reason but I think it's because it's an attractive type of programme.

So to start something from scratch, I don't think we'll get the opportunity given to you every time. I don't think I will get another opportunity again. That's speaking for everybody. Personally, I think we had to suit the, our characteristic too. I've never enjoyed doing the same thing over and over again because my whole career in academia, I've changed subjects deliberately so that I teach new thing. I've always been involved in projects rather than running administrative work. I do get administrative position, head of division, but as I said that gets very tiring, very fast.

Patricia Meyer:

When did you resign from NTU and join this new university?

Leong Kwong Sin:

If you look at [it], in hindsight it looks a bit frightening. SMU was set up within less than two years. I don't think any university has been set up in less than two years in that sense, from the word go. The first employee

was Teck Meng [Tan Teck Meng] of course, in March 1998, and then in April, May the other two [Tan Chin Tiong and Low Aik Meng] joined. Then the rest of us came in August.

Patricia Meyer: August 1998. One of your first areas of responsibility, as you joined the third university effort, you had responsibilities for the milestone chart and mission statement. Can you tell us how those two developed?

Leong Kwong Sin: And I've always been involved in tactical planning for projects, for things. So it was naturally given to me to plan out the various major stage that our activities that we have to achieve to be able to launch the university. So what I did was use a simple, what I called PERT, Programme Evaluation [and Review] Technique. It is a project management tool [used to] translate into a milestone chart, because it is easier for lay people without all the maths and things involved. And essentially we identified about a dozen or thirteen major things that we have to achieve. Things, we had to get the constitution done, that was assigned to Kee Yang. We had to get all the curriculum designed which I think Yang Hoong was involved with. We had to get all the infrastructure approved. The most important thing of course was the funding, that came to me. I was the first CFO [Chief Financial Officer] and we had various other tasks in that sense.

One of the main tasks, in fact the Government was very concerned with, was to find an American president. This is very strange to us. We said that, "Okay, why do we need an American president? Why don't we just get somebody who's educated in US before? We do have such people around." But the Government was right. We want to portray a very American-type university education that we will or may adapt to local requirements later, but beginning... so it just made sense. So that itself was one of the milestones. Of course for each milestone there are sub-activities, what are the things we need to do, like sourcing for president. We had to get a headhunting firm, all those things around. And when I drew up the milestone [chart], everybody take a look and see that, technically we could achieve it in less than two years, we were quite surprised too, right, so we said, might as well give it a go and see. And so we have actually meetings weekly to monitor the progress by milestone to see what we have achieved and what we have not achieved. And like any project, of course, there are some that get delayed beyond what we thought.

It was surprisingly difficult to get the constitution done in time because it's a lot of legal requirements etc. And the Government has been very helpful including the, the person in MOE [Ministry of Education] who was coordinating with us. Tan Hang Cheong, he's the principal now of Singapore Poly [Singapore Polytechnic]. He helped to push through the constitution quite rapidly. And of course finding the president turned out to be more difficult than we thought. And ultimately, whether it's coincidental

or not, we did find somebody from Wharton, since we have an agreement with them anyway. Somebody that do buy in to the idea of a third university. So Janice [Janice Bellace] came on board.

With that two things accomplished then the university could be launched within that short time period. The rest are all what I called legwork. A lot of time together spent debating over curriculum, debating over things, how the structure of the university is to look like.

Patricia Meyer: With the milestone chart guiding your progress over the next two years, one of the first tasks that they undertook, the group undertook, was to develop a mission statement?

Leong Kwong Sin: I would say the original mission statement is quite a natural outcome of a bunch of very enthusiastic people who didn't know what they can or cannot do. So you find a lot of high-sounding words. I think we did drop things like world-class and things like that; it was a bit overused at that time. But essentially the initial mission statement should be interpreted to show the enthusiasm and ambition of the earlier group, whether it's achievable or not. But it's good to aim high in that sense.

Patricia Meyer: How did the group, work through the process of developing that statement?

Leong Kwong Sin: One source that's very important that we should not dismiss was we went around and talk to the employers—what do you want to see in university graduates? Of course we were a bit cheeky then too. We told them, look we were in the previous two universities before, what are the things that you find incomplete? I didn't say they are bad, because they were our students. I think they are very good programmes, good graduates but nothing is perfect. So we ask them, if you are going to be a new university you must start doing something that is missing in the current bunch of graduates. This is a competitive type of strategy, that's all. And they did tell us quite frankly what they want: they want students who are able to talk on their feet.

Before SMU came about, the standard response to employment or employers' survey is that local graduate is inferior to foreign graduate in one sense—in that they don't seem to have the confidence to tell people what they know, what should be done. And you find that that itself was built into our programme. That we insist that every course, unless they get special dispensation from their bosses, should have a project which students must present. Our argument is very simple, if any student goes through SMU, 35 courses, okay say 30 with some exemption, and you make 30 presentations throughout that time, you got no choice but to have improved in your presentation skills, ability to talk, stand in front of the

class, because we give them grades for presentation. We give them grades for answering questions during presentation, not just stand there and talk. I mean talking is easy, but when people challenge you, how do you answer them?

Patricia Meyer: Can you give some more examples about what was different about what SMU did there?

Leong Kwong Sin: At that time we went and looked at several universities, how they use IT in their teaching rooms. We know what was being used in NUS, NTU. If you boil down to the pure technical difference, there is not much difference in the equipment that's being used, right? I mean those are standard things people use, overhead projectors, they use whiteboard, they use whatever it is. So we were asking ourselves, but if we want to have an interactive type of teaching environment what do we need? We need to get the technical equipment into the room and yet seemingly out of the way. Sometimes equipment can interfere with your teaching. So we looked at how Wharton designed their rooms, how Harvard designed their rooms.

When we first started in Bukit Timah, the temporary campus, we built actually two experimental teaching rooms. There were a few of us who are more gung-ho in IT types, people who loved to play with gadgets. [We] go in there, propose new things, try, cannot work, throw it away. Seem to be a waste. We even try sound systems without mikes and things. The acoustics will cost us a bomb So people revert back to mike and things. We tried with two projectors which worked quite well for some of us; some of us do want it. We tried with the first handwritten tablets to be massively used in Singapore, so much so that Microsoft was so happy, invited two of us, Themin [Themin Suwardy] and myself, to give a talk in their...I still remember how people make use of tablets to teach.

Patricia Meyer: Makes sense, trial it and then adopt it. You mentioned before that you also had a responsibility for finance?

Leong Kwong Sin: The city is a very, very good compromise. As I said, it's still in the city plus, it's right in the midst of all the cultural areas which with hindsight tied very nicely with the broad-based style education we give to our students. So talk about once the Government decided it will give us a city campus, somewhere in the city and that's where the ministers for land development, URA [Urban Redevelopment Authority], I think, all agreed, somehow they all identified this Bras Basah site.

Then I was asked to make a budget for the city campus, that's one of the documents I've given to you too. That one has a story behind it because I remember the Government was pushing, they need to announce things.

So somebody from Deputy Prime Minister's office called up and asked, "Who's the guy responsible for all the budgeting?" and of course somebody had to put up their hand. He asked, "What is the estimate for the city campus?" So I give an estimate, that's the figure that you saw there, \$1.6 billion. I still remember because it came out in the papers next day because he gave a talk. Then sometime in the morning, the newspaper came out, the chairman called me up. Kwon Ping said, "Now who give the figures to the Government that I don't know about?" That's one of the things...it's a good anecdote, an example of when we are busy doing our own things sometime we forget the, I call it, the necessity or nicety of communicating up through your chain of command.

Patricia Meyer: Did you have to develop compensation policies?

Leong Kwong Sin: We are supposed to be an American university so they try to attract people from the US type things. And we started early by saying that we will benchmark ourselves against certain level of American university, right.

Patricia Meyer: This was different from NTU and NUS?

Leong Kwong Sin: Different from NUS and NTU. That's why when we first started, some people from the other two universities accused us of spoiling the market. But then they learn very quickly and now they're outbidding us anyway, not all the time but sometimes they do, right? But I don't think we can choose to ignore the market if you want people from there. Why do people relocate to Singapore? I always tell them, I'm sure Singapore got some attraction for people but I don't think people come here for love, right? Not for money fully too, but then the compensation package must be attractive enough, right?

Patricia Meyer: Can you talk a little bit about the process by which the city campus was designed and how that design was realised?

Leong Kwong Sin: The Campus Development Committee at the board level made a very interesting decision; they decide to go for design competition, rather than ask people to submit a quote and then we choose. I think there are hundred over designs, it's a first-level design so it doesn't cost the architectural firm too much money yet. Those conceptual designs and all the designs were displayed, people voted for it, people including those of us who were involved in NTU, I mean SMU, as well as the board, the government people, interested public including the architect association, all those things because they are so conscious about the green lung in the city, right, that we are going to destroy.

So out of hundred over designs, they shortlisted half a dozen or so and from which two were picked, one to build the admin block at Victoria, the other to build the cluster of academic, including the library, buildings on Bras Basah Park itself. So the approach is new in the sense that very few government-funded projects go on an open competition basis and where public can give comments, so it came out good in the newspaper too. With hindsight I think that's a very good advertisement for SMU before we launch our first programme because parents and potential students see that SMU is a group of people who do things rather differently, right. Oh, by the way, later if you look, that is the tagline for our first advertisement, SMU is different, so it is not a deliberate play on words, because from the whole process of building SMU, from the board level down, I think we do things rather differently, right. I mean not earthshaking but it's different from the normal government approach, those things.

So they design, they select the design, after which then the architect then come and work with, as I said, the group of people who plan out all the space and actually begin to fit out where do you put all those components, where to put the seminar rooms, which of the building become the library; it's not that straight forward. To give an illustration, there were two small schools that were planned, that were in existence then, small I said, one is SIS [School of Information Systems], the other is accountancy. So the original assigned building was actually swapped because two schools, each of us look at our needs, the size is not much different, 80 square meters that's all, because of the relative need, we swap that's all. That also reflects the good working relationship within SMU at that time. The dean is not territorial, said I want, this is my place and you will not touch it. So that was good. Of course the business school being the biggest school swipe the biggest building. It has to, right, no choice. Actually I don't think it's the biggest [building]; biggest might be econs [economics] and social science [building] because it's supposed to house two schools. [Lee Kong Chiang School of Business is the biggest school in terms of size]

So that reflects how the details were worked out, bit by bit, room by room. It goes down to the detail of where to put the power point for the working user group committee. Michael and myself were involved, a lot of other people were involved, where to site the tables and all that is because the conceptual design of the SMU building is again rather different. It's not a block structure, it's very odd, sorry, I shouldn't use the word, it's a unique shaped building, every single building looked different with all the curves. It's a great challenge to fit in all the teaching rooms and offices. I think it is safe to say that I don't think you can find many teaching rooms and offices that's exactly the same with another one.

Patricia
Meyer:

Were there any difficult issues in that first year's, with the pioneer students, any challenges?

Leong Kwong Sin: I think the difficulty will be from the students' perspective. Because whenever you start something new people tend to be overly enthusiastic. So, in some sense if you look at the first batch of business students, first batch of account students that I teach, when I start teaching them accounting, we were very tough with them. And so, right, the first batch, their grades are not great. But they are not worse students than the later batch so you can see the trend. Of course, some people say there is grade inflation; we tend to be more lenient over time. But I don't think so, we tend to expect a lot more from the first batch but in some sense, it also reflects their good attitude. They also accept whatever is given to them. They might not be happy. We don't have students in the first two batch asking, can you improve their grade? Unfortunately we do have some of them doing it now, asking for it. Previously they just take it. They might not be happy, but they take it. So it reflects [that] there is a different type of reward for starting something new. The student enjoy, the faculty enjoy. Some students enjoy it too much. The first batch, I still remember when I was teaching them, I think a bunch of students never open their textbooks until the sixth week.

Patricia Meyer: How is that possible?

Leong Kwong Sin: Because my test is on the sixth week, they all fail, right, flat. That's the first time I give so many zeros. They said that, "Oh I thought we're supposed to be interactive." But cannot be interactive until you don't study, right. But they woke up very quickly.

Patricia Meyer: I wanted to just ask you, your reflections or thoughts on the first commencement at SMU?

Leong Kwong Sin: The first commencement is always different. As I said the first batch of pioneers are very close. In fact the only group, because it was a small group, where we almost know everybody. By the way, we also have the interesting philosophy among some of us, not every faculty agree, we tell the students to call us by first name, some do, some dare not, some of them still shy in Singapore, or maybe they're just polite which is good too. And they're rather close so on the first commencement, you almost feel like your own kids [are] graduating. So in some sense the feeling will never be replicated, not because we don't like the subsequent batch more, I don't think you can see it that way but maybe the analogy with parents...some parents will always remember their first child, not because we have favourites, but because it's always something very different. So that was quite fun.

Patricia Meyer: Looking back over the last ten years of the university, what do you see as important about what SMU has done?

Leong Kwong Sin: I think the most important part is to, if they can retain the experimental spirit, not just the things that I mentioned before like IT, teaching rooms, everything else. If we don't try new things frequently it is a very natural progress to bureaucracy they call it here. I mean this is quoting those social sciences, not my area, but I read about it. We will tend to become just another one of those old established universities. Already we see signs of some of it; it's quite inevitable when a place grows big, right, you need a system to run things, you need to be seen to be fair. Therefore when people ask, can I do this, no you can't because I don't allow the other person to do it, why should I allow you to do that, right? Hopefully we don't go too far that way, right, so if we can try new things every now and then. Of course that one will be in the hand of the provost, president and all the deans of various schools. If they are doing new things all the time. I think one easy measure is every two years [if] you haven't done anything new something is wrong because that's how fast things are changing.

Patricia Meyer: How did being part of SMU affect you or change you?

Leong Kwong Sin: We have quite a lot of fun. Of course, I say it again, this is selective memory. There's a lot of stress. Maybe this is the time to introduce that statement that the chairman made, Ho Kwon Ping told us from the beginning, his own company has a lot of projects, they build things. He said traditionally when people are involved in a big project, on average among all the staff, they lose fifteen pounds each, right, in weight. Using his statement then I don't think I worked very hard because I gained five pounds in the first three years in SMU. Of course I can quote other social science studies, when people stress they eat a lot more okay, so they put on weight. But stress is both good and bad, but stress reflects that there are challenges at that time, whether we want to live through the same stress again is a different thing.

End of Interview

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
BBM	Bachelor of Business Management
CAC	Centre for Academic Computing
CFO	Chief Financial Officer
HR	Human Resources
IB	International Baccalaureate
IR	Integrated Resorts
IS	Information Systems
IT	Information Technology
MOU	Memorandum Of Understanding
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
PERT	Programme Evaluation and Review Technique
RJC	Raffles Junior College
SIM	Singapore Institute of Management
SMU	Singapore Management University
UNISIM	Singapore Institute of Management University
URA	Urban Redevelopment Authority
US	United States
VP	Vice President
WRDS	Wharton Research Data Services