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Oral History Interview with Hwang Soo Chiat: Conceptualising SMU

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: Hwang Soo Chiat

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 12 October 2010

Location: Singapore Management University, Li Ka Shing Library Recording Studio

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Patricia Meyer: Today is the 12th of October 2010 and I'll be speaking with Hwang Soo Chiat on the 'Conceptualising SMU' oral history project and we're meeting in the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library at Singapore Management University.

The focus of today's recording is your recollections and your perspective on the formation and early days of SMU. I'd like to step back to the mid-1990s when there were changes in tertiary education in Singapore being discussed, particularly changes at SIM [Singapore Institute of Management]. At that time, where were you and what were you doing?

Hwang Soo Chiat: To me, it's the start of something that is great. Actually [looking at] the conception of the university at that point in time and what it is now, I think they were two totally different things. We started on the basis that we wanted to become a huge university and, to some extent, to provide for, not just the A-level students, but also people who have graduated [from polytechnic], like the university [Singapore Institute of Technology] that Chin Tiong [Tan Chin Tiong] is heading at this moment in time. So the role has shifted tremendously from the time we were told about it till what SMU is today. I think it's a totally different thing entirely. SMU today is more like a boutique university. Then, it was meant to be a 'mass' university, in the sense that it's a university for the masses, just like NTU and NUS [National University of Singapore]. We're supposed to be a full-fledged university with all the various things coming in, but with primary focus on business and management education.

Patricia Meyer: When you joined this small team, what was your first set of responsibilities in this team?

Hwang Soo Chiat: And well, we all chipped in, in everything that needed to be done but later on, I was tasked with the HR [human resources] department. I was the acting HR director for a short while, until we got a full time HR director in. And I was working on things like the faculty and staff manual, handbook for faculty, and handbook for staff. I had to go for a course, SAP [business management software] course because we wanted to buy the SAP programme, the ERP [Enterprise Resource Planning] system and I had to attend the module on HR since I was tasked with HR, as the HR director. Teng Aun was there with me and I think he was doing the accounting module if I'm not wrong. It was actually the most frightening experience, not having done an exam for years [and now] having to sit for an exam, and knowing that you have to pass the exam was actually more daunting than anything else.

Patricia Meyer: Can you share some of your recollections from the first day of class? What was that like as the university opened?

Hwang Soo Chiat: I think it was quite exciting. I remember the first day of class was held in Bukit Timah. And we were all pretty excited and the students were very enthusiastic. I still miss the first batch of students from the university. I think they were a very unique bunch of people. By nature I think they were more risk takers, to be willing to join a new university without any history, without any so-called benchmark that they can use. And they were more go-getters, people who were willing to try anything and everything. And I think they showed a

lot more initiative than the later batches of students. They [the later batches] become more and more like the traditional university undergraduates. And I think if you ask any one of us, those of us who started with the university, the huge majority of us would tell you that we miss the initial batches a lot more. They were fun people. I mean we got really close with them. The class size was very small, about 20, 30 per class and we got to know every one of them by name by the end of the term. They make the attempt to get to know us too so it was a two-way traffic. I still miss those years. (laughter)

Patricia Meyer: And did your teaching style change now that you're at SMU?

Hwang Soo Chiat: Oh yeah. Actually a lot of us started with University of Singapore, that was way back in the Bukit Timah campus. So when we first started with SMU in Bukit Timah campus, it was more like a homecoming for all of us. And in the SU [University of Singapore] days, in the NTI [Nanyang Technological Institute] days, the NTU days, even in the joint campus days, it was like lecture, tutorial sort of a system.

I still remember when I was in NTU I was lecturing in one of the lecture theatres that I think it's LT1 [Lecture Theatre 1] that can sit a thousand people, and it was for the first year and I was teaching OB [Organisational Behaviour], and you can more or less tell that the first 10, 15 rows of students are there to learn, and then those people who are right at the back, you know, they are there because they have to be there and that's about it. And I always tell my students here that, you know, that as far as I'm concerned I'm teaching a smaller group because they are there because they want to learn. But there's no interaction in the sense that when you give a lecture, there's no interaction.

And the tutorial system was different from what we have in our seminar system. The tutorial system is where you have prepared questions and all the students are interested in is your model solutions for the tutorial questions. So at the end of the class every student will ask you, "Can I have the suggested solution?" and I think some people even printed the suggested solution for the students to get them off their backs so as to say. Whereas here in SMU, the interactive teaching style is such that the questions just arise when you are discussing a particular topic so the students ask the questions and you answer them. Sometimes because of the question that the student asks, you have other questions that you think are related so you post it back at the students. And you get them to think about the problems and the questions that arise and, you know, you get them to try and work out some form of solutions. I think it's a lot more fun teaching in SMU than teaching in NTU or NUS.

Patricia Meyer: How did the students react to the new approach to teaching?

Hwang Soo Chiat: I think the first two batches reacted to them extremely well. I think they came with the expectation that it was going to be different. They were happy to have a different way of learning, and I think they were a lot more enthusiastic. They were more willing to ask questions.

Patricia Meyer: Were there any difficulties that you faced in that first year of operation with the pioneer students?

Hwang Soo Chiat: Sure, I mean, in terms of facilities there were a lot of things that were not as freely available. So for example, the library facilities weren't as great as the other two universities when we first started. Now we have this spanking fabulous library. A lot of things that we have now, we didn't have it then. The great thing about the first couple of batches, were that they were so innovative. They make do with what they have and they make the most out of everything that they have. There were no CCAs [Core Curricular Activities], we didn't plan for CCAs. The students started their own CCAs.

Patricia Meyer: When you were speaking with JC students, what kinds of questions did they have?

Hwang Soo Chiat: The first question they always ask is, "Is this a recognised university? Are you recognised?" My answer is very simple, "Who do you think is funding the university?" And I always say that we are the only unique university in the world in that we are supposed to be a private university that is fully funded by the Government. And I said, "If the Government is funding us, you think the Government is not recognising us?" And I said, to me, it's something that's redundant. No doubt at all it's a recognised university. And I said this is something that I don't think you all need to worry about, And I was telling them about the pedagogy and I think a lot of people were sold in terms of the pedagogy that we sort of adopted. I think a lot of parents sort of see the benefits of having a new type of pedagogy.

Patricia Meyer: Did you have a chance to speak with parents as well?

Hwang Soo Chiat: Yeah, in the initial years the concern has always been, "You're more expensive [and] you take longer. Why should we send our children to you?" So, you have to address that concern in the sense that, I always tell the parents, "The university philosophy has always been [that] nobody should be deprived of a university education because of financial concerns." And I said, "Look, at School of Accountancy especially we have our own scholarship to help students, especially students that have got financial problems." I said, "If its financing that's a problem, I don't think you all need to worry too much about it, okay?" I said as far as number of years are concerned, my favourite answer has always been, "You as a working parent, you know how long your working life is going to be," and I said, "In Singapore, it's going to get longer and longer." I said, "By the time your kid is going to retire, you're lucky if the retirement age is not 70." Like I said, I'm seeing it coming, and already it is coming. It's going to be 62, it's going to be 65, it's going to be 67, it's probably going to be 70, if the need arises. What choice have we got? And I said, "Look, what's one more year?"

I always tell the kiddos, I said, "You know, you go and talk to any university graduate—when you're in university, you're dying to get out. After one year of working life, you're

dying to get back into the university.” So I said, “Why do you want to rush? [You] might as well enjoy yourself, really fill yourself with all the requisite skills that you need to do well in the corporate world.” And I said, “Look, we are giving you an opportunity to become, not just a specialist, but a specialist with a much broader understanding of all the other areas that will make you a good accountant. Why do you want to rush and just become a specialist and be so narrow in your focus and about everything else?”

Patricia Meyer: When the first class came to commencement, what were your reflections at that point and what were your feelings?

Hwang Soo Chiat: It's almost like seeing your child being given birth (laughter). It's the first batch and I think we were very proud, particularly so in the sense that a lot of them got out and got good jobs. As time goes on, we find a lot of them are climbing up the ladders and doing very well. The same thing applied when the first batch of accountancy students graduated. So, there were two commencements that were [a] first for me at least—first batch of SMU students and first batch of accountancy students. For those of us who were involved with them, I think we were all very proud and very, very satisfied that they managed to achieve whatever they have achieved.

Patricia Meyer: Looking back over the last ten years of SMU, what do you see as significant milestones?

Hwang Soo Chiat: I think there are many milestones. The first one is when we actually become a registered university, with the act [Singapore Management University Act] enacted. And then of course, when we first started teaching, when we were at the Bukit Timah campus and [when] the first batch of students graduated. And then school started, then the first batch of accountancy graduates graduated, then moving here. There are many milestones.

Patricia Meyer: Do you think the vision for the university has evolved since 2000?

Hwang Soo Chiat: Well, if you look at the mission statement, we're basically to produce graduates who are entrepreneurial and have all the other qualities that we wanted to achieve. I think the main mission and vision—We want to be a top-class university—I don't think the mission has changed or the vision has changed. If anything else, it's a question, “How much closer are we to seeing the fulfilment of the mission and vision?” I think we have succeeded in various ways. We are producing students that the market acknowledges are very different from the other graduates. Our students are said to be a lot more entrepreneurial, which is part of the mission that we set for ourselves. Our students are able to communicate much better, hold themselves up as confident graduates and everything else. So in a sense, I think, over the years, we are seeing the fulfilment of the mission and vision of the university.

Patricia Meyer: Just to look back at your whole time being associated with this new university, how did it

Meyer: impact you or change you?

Hwang
Soo Chiat: Here I think the responsibilities are much greater in the sense that the future of the younger generation literally is in your hands. How you mould them and how you shape them is something that's going to impact on what they are going to be in the future. Basically I enjoy teaching and the university gives me this opportunity to do what I enjoy and the fulfilment comes when students come back to you after graduation and say, "I really appreciated what you have done for me." I've got students who come back years later to tell me that when we were in your class, when you are saying certain things, we sort of say, "Ahhh! It's one of those things," but then [when] we go on into the real world, we suddenly realise, "My God, this guy said exactly what is happening to me now and what he has advised is something that I actually am doing." And that gives me a lot of satisfaction and a lot of sense of fulfilment. So, in some ways the [SMU] students are different compared to NTU and NUS students that I've taught before. I'm still maintaining contact with some of the first batch of students but the distance seems to be greater with the later groups of students. So, if you talk about impact, I don't think there is really that much of an impact in terms of what I do in my life and how I feel about my life. Yeah, that's about it.

Patricia
Meyer: Thank you.

End of Interview

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
A-level	Advanced Level General Certificate of Education
BBM	Bachelor of Business Management
CCAs	Co-Curricular Activities
ERP	Enterprise Resource Planning
HR	Human Resources
JC	Junior College
LT	Lecture Theatre
MA	Management Accounting
NTI	Nanyang Technological Institute
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
OB	Organisational Behaviour
RJC	Raffles Junior College
SA	Student Association
SIM	Singapore Institute of Management
SMU	Singapore Management University
SU	Singapore University
VJC	Victoria Junior College