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# Oral History Interview with Tsui Kai Chong: Conceptualising SMU

Kai Chong TSUI

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**Singapore Management University**

**Li Ka Shing Library**

**Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story**

Interviewee: Tsui Kai Chong

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 26 October 2010

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

Accession No.: SMUOH-2011-0009PV

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*Users of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. SMU does not exercise editorial control on the contents of the interview. We advise users to refer to the audio recording for the accurate/ authorised version of the interview.*

Pat Meyer: How did you first hear about plans for a third university?

Kai Chong: It came as an announcement, that there would be a new university. A group of us were brought into an auditorium in the Nanyang Technological University to listen to the then Minister for Education, Dr. Tony Tan, talk about this new university.

Pat Meyer: What was your role when you joined the planning team?

Kai Chong: [Initially] we were just given very general tasks. I am numerate, so I'm asked to look at some of the numbers with Leong Kwong Sin. Later I was put in charge of IT, and so my role was look after the IT programme [infrastructure] in the new university.

Pat Meyer: Can you tell us about the visits overseas?

Kai Chong: We also explored wireless. That was something new, and we were taking a rather bold step in doing that [then]. There were two reasons why we decided to use wireless although it's a very new technology – that we have a very short timeline to bring the IT systems up. If we were to wire every point, we would probably take another three months, or probably more. So it's far easier just to put up wireless points. In some places wireless worked incredibly well, like in the cafeteria. And classrooms as well. We were, at that point in time, one of the first institutions of higher learning that used wireless.

Pat Meyer: Did you also look at how IT could affect the teaching, the delivery of the materials?

Kai Chong: We invested in a learning management system that's put together by a company called NCS. That's where you deposit soft copies of [course] materials. Back then there aren't many commercially available online materials, so we have to develop our own. What we wanted to do was to get away from distributing hard copy of notes or slides to students. We wanted all of this moved online. We also wanted submissions of assignments to be done online. So the learning management system that we had was specially designed to cater for that. Bandwidth was a problem [then]. Buffering technology was still at its infancy, so video streaming that we have today like YouTube, would have taken a horrendous amount of money to put in place. So those things were not available.

Pat Meyer: Can you tell us when you were appointed dean?

Kai Chong: It was sometime in 1999. The then president of SMU, Janice Bellace, asked me, over lunch, whether I would consider being dean, and I accepted the position.

Pat Meyer: As you took on that role, what were your ideas for the scope of the business school and what would make it distinctive?

Kai Chong: There were broadly three ideas. The person must have a very global perspective. Second, the person must be extremely articulate, be able to communicate, not just among ourselves but with different races from different parts of the world. Third the person must be given some opportunity to contribute to society. So that's why we have community service within our programme. As for the academic content of the programme, it's pretty standard business programme with two distinctive features. We have a core group of business courses, then you have the various electives.

Pat Meyer: Did you face any constraints as you were planning?

Kai Chong: The beauty of starting a new university is you start with a clean sheet of paper, you have no baggage. No constraint, with the exception of a rather tight budget but we can always work around these problems. I think the initial group of people were people with very good ideas, very driven, and so things worked very well. When we hired people, we attracted people who were keen to make changes and introduce new ideas. So that helped.

Pat Meyer: How did these plans evolve?

Kai Chong: The original plan was to close the two business schools in NUS and NTU. The planning parameters were that SMU was supposed to accept something in the region of 1500 students [each year]. That would be the sum total of the two university plus students from SMU. The idea of having an evening class was very quickly dropped. Minister Teo Chee Hean, he asked us to concentrate on the full-time programme first. Later we had this discussion with Janice, and the numbers were moved from the very ambitious 1500 to 300, because it became obvious that the other two universities are not going to close their business schools.

Pat Meyer: What about the decision to have a four-year undergraduate programme? What were your thoughts on that?

Kai Chong: We were asked to design a programme that's very similar to business programmes in the United States a four-year programme. We were initially concerned that we may not be competitive. NUS had a four years honours programme, so we need to make ours direct honours. NTU had a three-year honours by merit programme, and so we have to put in features that would allow students to be exposed to more things, to have a reason why they should stay an extra year, and obviously to make it modular such that those who are very hardworking may finish the four-year programme in three, or at least three and a half.

Pat Meyer: What aspects of the Wharton curriculum did SMU adopt?

Kai Chong: We looked at the Wharton curriculum to see what nice features it had. We also looked at other US business school programmes. If you were to look across business programmes in United States, you will find very similar courses being offered. So there's nothing very distinctive about it. Our curriculum is I think very similar to any US curriculum. You will find that it has a core programme with electives [and specialisations].

Pat Meyer: I'd like to talk about how the initial hiring for faculty went, how did you bring in faculty? What kinds of questions did they have?

Kai Chong: The hiring, if I may, we can break it up into three phases. Phase one was before the students arrived. We needed people that would help with designing courses. We concentrated on senior faculty who would be able to interact with parents and students when we do our marketing. We do have people who are very keen to join a new university. Like the planning team, we were attracted by this very romantic notion of starting a new university. Phase two was when the university started. We focused on younger people. At that point in time the agenda was to increase our research presence. So we focus on people who had a slight bent towards research, and not just good teaching. Very quickly after the second group of people arrive, we still find that we have teaching needs. And so what we did was to hire a group of very good teachers, and these are our teaching faculty or adjuncts. These are people from industry or people from the other universities with a very, very strong teaching bent.

Pat Meyer: Can you tell us about the first admissions exercise, what was the process like?

Kai Chong: The recruitment process wasn't too terribly difficult because spaces in Singapore for tertiary business education was somewhat limited and it's rather popular. Most of the students and parents were a little apprehensive of this new university. They were very inclined to ask the same question, "Is this university government-recognised?" I think they're comforted when we told them that there is an Act called the SMU Act passed in parliament, that we are funded by the government. And that the people that put together this new university were originally from the two national universities. There were also parents who asked, "Can we guarantee that after their son or daughters graduate, that he will be employed?" Of course we very boldly said, "Yes, we can guarantee that." Now think about this, we have three years or four years to work on this child. At the end of three years and four years if we can't find this gentleman or young lady, a job, I think we should close the university.

Things were a lot simpler for us because of the initial group of students. They like to call themselves the pioneers of SMU. They are obviously a very different lot who dare to sign up for a university. At that point in time when we were marketing, we have no premises. And all we were selling was a dream. I think these are the sort of people with that sort of drive and sense of can-do and adventure, they will succeed. No amount of teaching I think, can teach them that sort of drive. This initial group of students then help us to recruit

subsequent batches of students.

Pat Meyer: As you're coming up towards the opening day, were there any challenges that you faced in order to have the school and university ready to open?

Kai Chong: I can't think of any significant challenges, except for one. A parent called us and asked us, "Are we sure that we are able to open the following Monday?" Because she noticed that our roof is not on yet. It's just a roof; one week is a long time. So we got that in. Day one was memorable for some of us. My deputy dean, Low Kee Yang, went around distributing apples. That was picked up by the press. I would imagine the students loved it.

Pat Meyer: Any other memories of opening day? The roof was on (laughter), the students were there.

Kai Chong: I just had two concerns – that all the equipment in the classrooms function, because that's the first time we're testing it with a live audience of that size.

A week later. We had a group of junior college teachers with us. They were interested to find out what we are doing and our selection process and the sort of people that we want to select for the programme, because we had a bunch of rather noisy, enthusiastic and very articulate students walking around campus. And one of the teachers among that group asked me, "Where do I get those students from?" "We got it from you." She replied, "But they are not like that when they are with us in JC." Well I answered, "Because you don't allow them to."

Pat Meyer: How was this new teaching style introduced? How did the students respond to it?

Kai Chong: We wanted students to be participative in class because we wanted to groom a group of students that will stand out when they graduate. We made a very deliberate decision that the students coming to SMU may be not much different in terms of their schooling, but when they get out, they must be very different. So in our selection process, we interviewed every student. So if you came to an interview, if you just kept quiet, chances are we will not have that student. So it's a selection process, we decided to put students together. We also know that if a group of people who know each other for a while, and if they sit in class, they will be naturally noisier, because you're comfortable with. So what we did was before term started, we have teambuilding with the students. The first group, the pioneering batch, the faculty went with the students to do the teambuilding. Subsequent batches we send them to Outward Bound School in Pulau Ubin. So once you get to know each other there, in class they will naturally be noisier, you know choose to speak. But what we also very deliberately did was that when we go for all of these team buildings, the teams, we kept them intact. We put two or three of this team into a class.

The students were rather enthusiastic and so and then, and one week before the exams, nearly died of heart attack, because they're obviously not studying. And I was walking

around telling the students, please study, you know, we do kick you out if you don't do well. Their view is that, no it's an American system; no one fails in the US system. I said, no we do kick people out, this is still Singapore. And as a result of which, after the first semester, I remember having an emergency meeting in the Tanglin Community Club in the backroom with now judge of the appeals, Andrew Pang, Phang Sock Yong and a few other senior faculty about the results. We had one third of our students, a hundred plus of them, with a GPA of below two. That was term one.

Pat Meyer: Two terms per year?

Kai Chong: Yes...that was term one. We could've, obviously, moderate the grades such that more of them would pass but we decided against it, because that would not be a true reflection of, not the abilities, but the efforts. With that in mind, we also made the rule, there and then, in that basement, that three strikes and you're out. And that's how that rule came about. That they allowed three terms with GPA of three and below, and thereafter, we'll have to ask them to leave.

Pat Meyer: Any other challenges in that first year with students?

Kai Chong: Very little. Most of the challenges were resources, nothing to do with the students. They were always a very good bunch of people to be with, they're extremely open. We also did something that the other university did not succeed in doing, which is to have an open dialogue with the students every time. You will notice that none of SMU students write letters to the press to complain about SMU. Not yet. The rule then was, if we have a problem, let's discuss it, and let's solve them together.

Pat Meyer: Can you tell us about some of your experiences during the school year working with different groups of students?

Kai Chong: It's a new university, and so there were no societies, no groups of any sort. And we have very little money to start some of these societies with. But we have very enterprising students who form their groups. They will come and through Professor Low Aik Meng, ask for permission to form clubs. And the answer will always be a yes, provided they don't ask us for too much money. So that's how they got started.

There were clubs of all sorts. I remember asking some of them, why don't they merge. There was a group that wanted to form to play chess. There was another group that wanted to form because they wanted to play Chinese chess. Of these groups that formed, they were all students led. Some of them were rather successful, and some of them are still running today. There was also a very different attitude among the students. I give you an example. One day a group of students came to me and said, "You know Kai Chong, the food here is not very good," he used stronger language than that. "Can we do something about it?" When he said we that means the students want to do something

about it. Quite unlike other places where, you are the dean, “Why don’t *you* go and do something about *our* food?” So obviously you have a very different group of students. And so what the students did was, to take orders, drove out, pack the food and bring it back. And it’s deliberate. When they say that we will charge 50 cents more upfront and many of us were very happy to give him the 50 cents, because he would use the money for something else, but because he was running some other club. And they are very enterprising young people.

Pat Meyer: Early on, SMU students were participating in case competitions. Can you tell us some of that history?

Kai Chong: After year one, we received an invitation to participate in a case competition organised by NUS. Typically we would send year three and year four to a case competition because these students would have gone through most of the programme and would have probably have done strategy. You must remember we only finish year one. I was asked to send a team. So we trained a team and send that team to NUS. And that team emerged champion, beating year three and year four, from NUS and NTU. We also had another success one semester later. We send another team to Copenhagen. Another team, not the same team.

Pat Meyer: Not the same students.

Kai Chong: Not the same student. We beat I think, 11 other international teams in Copenhagen to emerge champion. The strategy there is the same. All we did was tell the students, “Go there, please don’t be last.” Because the case competition is a mere game. If you succeed at the case competition does not mean that you will succeed in life. Winning is fine, not winning is okay. Go out there and make friends. And that’s the reason why we do not send the same team twice. We want to expose this experience to as many students as possible.

Pat Meyer: For the graduate programmes, there was a Masters of Applied Finance. Can you just tell us a bit about how that programme started?

Kai Chong: It was around the same time that the very successful Masters of Applied Finance programme in NUS stopped. I do not know why NUS terminated that programme, it was very successful. So a group of us decided to start that programme in SMU.

Kai Chong: In the group of Masters of Applied Finance we did the same thing as the undergraduate. We interviewed every one of them. So at least we’re comfortable with them. There’s something that we did in the selection process, we looked at four things: the ‘A’ levels, the SAT scores for the undergraduate, and for the postgraduate we look at the GMAT scores, we had the interview, we also had a written test.



Pat Meyer: Just looking back over the time that you were at SMU, what do you see as significant or the accomplishments that this new university...?

Kai Chong: Probably three things that stand out about this university, it's able to nurture a group of students who obviously stand out in the eyes of employers, I think that's the most significant. It broke a number of traditions, from the logo, how we recruit students and so on. And it's also a university where the student is the centre of the activity. Not the establishment, not the faculty, but the students. I believe that those are the strength of this new and very impressive university.

Pat Meyer: How did being part of SMU change you?

Kai Chong: Ah! Never got time to think about that. I'm one of those people that, given a task, I'll just go and do it. How did I change, perhaps ask some of the people around me. The two things that were important to me, one is obviously have a very good group of students and privilege to have met those students, admitted, and some I've taught, they remain friends and we are in contact. The other group, the early group of faculty members who were very passionate, very unselfish about spending time in building a university.

**End of Interview**

## Acronyms List

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Definition</b>
GMAT	Graduate Management Admission Test
GPA	Grade Point Average
IT	Information Technology
JC	Junior College
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MDA	Media Development Authority
NCSS	National Council of Social Services
NLB	National Library Board
NIE	National Institute of Education
NUS	National University of Singapore
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
SIM	Singapore Institute of Management
SIMU	Singapore Institute of Management University
SMU	Singapore Management University
UK	United Kingdom