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Oral History Interview with John Niland: Conceptualising SMU

John NILAND

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: John Niland

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 7th Feb, 2012

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

Accession No.:

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<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>This is Pat Meyer. Today is Tuesday, 7th of February 2012. I will be speaking with Professor John Niland for the “Conceptualising SMU” oral history project. John has served on SMU’s Board of Trustees since it began and we are meeting at the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library at Singapore Management University.</p> <p>The subject of today’s recording is your role as a member of SMU’s Board of Trustees and your recollections and perspectives on the early days of SMU. I’d like to begin by asking you to give us a quick overview of your career before you were involved with SMU.</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>I spent most of my life, well, spent most of my adult working life in universities, but in and out of universities. I did a PhD in the US at the University of Illinois, labour economics, economics of education. From the University of Illinois, I went to Cornell [University], was on the faculty there for four years or so. Then my wife and I decided to come back to Australia to the ANU [Australian National University] for a year or two, and then I got a full chair at the University of New South Wales.</p> <p>I was the foundation professor of industrial relations which was a major public policy area in the 1970s. I moved on up through the university ladders and spent some time as the head of the School of Economics, dean of the Faculty of Commerce and then on to vice-chancellorship. But along the way I took time out; I did a lot of consulting work in organisational change at the workplace level.</p> <p>I was particularly interested in enterprise bargaining, collective bargaining, which was quite a foreign concept in Australia, but is now essentially the standard approach. I spent a period away from the university on leave to head up the Environment Protection Authority. And I went in and out of various other things. Along the way, I spent time as the head of the academic trade union in Australia. Then I spent time as the head of the vice-chancellors in Australia, so I have been on both sides of that particular equation. I came along to SMU as you say in about 2000, I think it was.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>How did you first hear about Singapore Management University?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>Well, I had a phone call one morning. My secretary said that there is a Janice Bellace on the phone. I happened to know Janice from my international professional body—at that stage it was called International Industrial Relations Research Association and I was the president. In fact, we held a conference in Sydney in 1992. Janice was part of that, she was on the International Executive and she and I got to know one another through that. Then when SMU was being set up, I guess someone asked her for the names of people who might be brought onto the board, and I guess that’s how my name came through. It was cleared the normal way I guess, and then Janice made the phone call and I said, “Well, give me a day or two to think about it,” but I didn’t need very long. I knew I was finishing up with UNSW, it hadn’t been announced at that point, but I was beginning to think what will the bridge be. I certainly wanted to maintain</p>

	involvement with Asia. And SMU was the first of my Asian involvements that started then. There's another set that arose in Hong Kong that have run parallel with SMU.
Patricia Meyer:	I'd like to ask you about the role that the Board of Trustees plays. SMU's university governance model was a new one for Singapore. Could you just tell us about the role and this new governance?
John Niland:	I think the Board of Trustees has been one of the really important design features of SMU. Its role is essentially to bring wider experience and wisdom. It helps with checks and balances. It helps, I imagine, with status positioning of the university. It's very hard to get a new university into the consciousness of the international community. You can't really do it by running advertisements in <i>The Economist</i> , there are thousands of universities that do that. There has got to be a way of lifting the visibility, but also creating a cache for that institution that lets people see very quickly that you're a serious-minded institution and endeavour.
Patricia Meyer:	In those very early days, what were some of the first responsibilities or priorities of the board?
John Niland:	<p>One, was the admission process, the process and the quality of student admission. Secondly, was the design of the programmes that we were going to run. A third one, was simply physical capacity, where was the university located now. There was a debate, I remember, over whether we should indeed stay at Bukit Timah. It became a very comfortable venue. We spent all this money it would have seemed in bringing it up standard and here we were about to move out. There was quite a movement around to stay at Bukit Timah and then should we go to site A or B or C. This one wasn't the only site that was on offer, so that was part of the discussion.</p> <p>But the area that I paid most attention to—I guess it is why in large part I've been brought onto to the board—was the international dimension of the university, how would it reach. If you're a young institution, how do you get the attention from the revered institutions overseas? If you are so young, one of the answers is, be young in Singapore because you've got the cache of Singapore on your calling card when you try to open the doors.</p> <p>The other thing I was interested in was governance structures and management systems. How do you arrange for people to be appointed to the university pay scales, remuneration arrangements? I was particularly keen to see a system of performance review which was transparent and well-understood so that remuneration adjustment would reflect contribution to the university and scholarly performance. It wouldn't be a type of public service formulaic increase as the years roll by.</p> <p>The other area that I was involved in was the development of the committee structure within the university. I then went particularly to the financial remuneration committee,</p>

	<p>designed its charter—the way in which it worked its way through the year, and the events that had remuneration on the one hand, budgeting on the other. I guess in the other ways, I was involved in strategy, workshops. I led the first strategy work day that the university had and then got involved in various other projects as they came along, but primarily FinRem [Finance and Remuneration Committee] was my home base within the board.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Thank you for that big overview of all the responsibilities. Could we talk about some of those in more detail? I think when the board started there were just two committees on the board, academic affairs and the audit. You were vice chair of academic affairs, can you tell us about what that group is responsible for?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>The key responsibility for Academic Affairs Committee was to determine the nature of the gold standard at SMU. Were we going to be twenty-two carat gold or eighteen carat gold or...? Every university is gold, but there's gold and there's gold. And I had seen in another institution how easy it is to for the standards to drift down, rather than to build up, and to meet an aspiration that you set. So that we would not offer tenure to people coming in straight away. There are some who warranted it who would be offered tenure. But one of the things you find with a new institution is the senior leaders of that institution seek to recruit into it.</p> <p>The other thing that came through—this reflects Janice's background, I think this is one of the real contributions that she brought in the early years of the Academic Affairs Committee—was to recognise that really, there is a research-stream academic and there is an education or teaching-stream academic, adjunct or teaching or education, whatever you call it over here. But there was a research and tenure track, and if SMU was to be a research university then you needed the two tracks, which is not a common arrangement. It may have been fairly common at University of Pennsylvania, I'm not sure, but it certainly is not common in other universities because there the academic argument is well, an academic is an academic, you teach and you research, and you teach and you research, and you can't split it out. But, in fact, you can, with honour and dignity for both sides of that equation. It's not as though the researcher doesn't teach and teaching is important. It's not as though the good teacher doesn't do research as well. It's just that you've got different standards and a whole lot of other different arrangements. That's the second thing I think that the Academic Affairs Committee delivered to SMU. We've had to tweak it at about Year 10 but it's still essentially that model.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Can you just comment for a new, young university, what factors weigh in on the tenure clock? How was it decided for SMU?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>One of the reasons you probably need a longer tenure track at a new university is that we have fewer senior mentors for the younger faculty coming along. When I was at Cornell, there would have been a dozen of my colleagues up and down the corridors</p>

	<p>who were as grey then as I look now. I could easily turn up and you would get assistance. One of the things I found out about mentoring is that the individual mentee needs to have a choice. It's much better to have twelve people out there who could possibly do it, but to focus on the two or three you would feel most comfortable with. If there is only one or two—well, the mentee has to take what is offered, I suppose. And even the best one in the world, some of the relationships won't be as positive as they could be. So that's one of the challenges of SMU and I think that's one of the reasons that the tenure clock was extended.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>I'd like to ask you about the Finance and Remuneration Committee. You were the chair of that. Can you tell us a little bit more about the main functions of that committee?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>Well, on finance, it was to oversee the budget, to ask the questions. The key question to me was: How can we make the budgeting process a strategic exercise? How can you design all of the boxes and cells and levers and buttons, and all the rest that goes on in the budget process? How can you design that so that it serves the strategic goals of the university? And I think we're still working at that.</p> <p>Also on the finance side, universities never have enough money. It's always a question of how do you get more? SMU had a slightly different issue. We had significant resourcing; the funding in the early years was a multiple of what we knew it was going to be when we reached steady state. It was a premium applied, four at one stage, three and then two. So what the university was doing was building up a reserve through forward funding, through front-end funding, which we could use to plan with assurance. But then we knew that when we got to a certain stage, we'd drop down to the same level of funding as the other two universities.</p> <p>It also looked at the extent to which budgets would be in shortfall for funding coming in from the Government and from fees, and therefore how much we needed to be focusing on fund-raising endowment, international students and international student fees perhaps, and increasingly now the types of revenue generating activities that the universities engage in, such as executive education and outreach programmes. So that was the finance side.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Can you tell us some of your thoughts on the admissions criteria that SMU used and what kinds of students you were looking for?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>Well, certainly SMU was looking for a different style of student. And in a way that's pretty well reflected in the marketing, the image programme of the jumping student. The way in which we sought that out, that cultural characteristic out, was through interview. And I think that's been one of the other major elements, major points of difference, in Singapore, from what we tended to see in the other universities. When SMU was being established, I remembered Tony Tan saying that he wants SMU to be the beachhead for change in higher education. If you can do it at SMU and show it can</p>

	<p>be done, then the other universities will come along. There are a number of instances where you can point to the extent to which we have been flattered by imitation. The beachhead of change is really working.</p> <p>It's a very tricky and delicate issue, but SMU has stayed with the proposition that yes, grades are important, so therefore we can't come below a certain level. But we are prepared to say to some of the very top performing students in terms of their A-levels, "Sorry, but this is not the place for you," because they don't present the other qualities that SMU is looking for. It's hard to sustain, because you get the criticism from the parents, in particular, of the students who are really strong academic performers and who miss out. But the other thing that it does is that, in a world where universities start to compare admission cut-off scores, we are in a way shooting ourselves in the foot, because we are accepting that the admission score will come down because some of the very best students we didn't bring in. But of course, even though the admission score comes down, given the competitiveness for strong university positions, that admission score is still much greater, the cut-off is much higher than the minimum that's really needed to perform, to undertake that course.</p> <p>For example, in Australia, we use a single scale, 0 in effect to a 100. You've got to get 99.9 for admission into medicine. But you can certainly, but if you came down, it's established as low as 93, and admitted those. If you took every student above 93 and drew the names out of the hat for the number you need, they would still get the same number of high distinctions, distinctions and credits as the ones that come in at 99.9. This is the point I'm making, that there is a natural level of the natural floor above which all students will do just as well, by in large, by the time they finish their degree. I think SMU recognises that implicitly and is prepared to pay much greater attention to the other qualities that will give student life a buzz, a certain lift in the mood. And it will pay the university back in great amounts when twenty, thirty years out, I have no doubt. So the Academic Affairs Committee, working with the deans, identified that as the approach we wanted to take for student admissions.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Could you tell us a bit more about the relationship between the board and the president and the provost, particularly in the early days of SMU?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>By the very nature of an institution that started out living in one room—I guess that's the nature of this—people got to know one another very, very closely. And then of course we got to two rooms and three rooms and we grew a little bit bigger. There was a great sense of interaction between the chairman and the president and the members of the board who were coming on. Ron Frank [Ronald Frank] was the other overseas academic member of the board. And Janice at that point was the first president. So, Janice, Ron, myself, Chin Tiong [Tan Chin Tiong], with KP [Ho Kwon Ping] coming in—he's never short on enthusiasm and ideas and questions—they would often send us off into areas we had never really anticipated going into. There was just so much to do...</p> <p>I guess today everyone would say there's so much to do as well, but it had a different drumbeat to it back then. There was nothing that was not possible. We were the brand new kid on the block, being premium funded at three to four times what the others</p>

	<p>were doing. In a way, we knew that that was going to come to an end, but that's a long way away. At the moment it's still coming in; we're discussing new buildings, new courses. You give your right arm if you are really into and love universities; you'd give your right arm to be in the middle of something like that. And because Singapore is so serious about a quality development of its higher education system, you didn't feel as though you were spinning wheels or wasting time.</p> <p>I've been on advisory bodies for start-up universities—which is a good and true endeavour, it's a community service that you do, it's necessary to engage in that from time to time—but nothing quite like SMU, which had the particular attention of the Government. In many other areas where I've seen new institutions come together, the government has put them together; you've got a new body emerging because they're trying to solve a problem. It's arisen out of a divorce or they're trying to prevent a divorce of institutions. Whereas SMU was greenfield, totally fresh, had funding at an appropriate level, had a group of people whose capacity was beyond question. The one danger, I guess is we simply got ahead of ourselves, we'd raced from point A to point E, without realising we should have covered B and C along the way. Then you look back and, oh, we better take care of that. It was a very good time.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>What role does QAFU play in the development of SMU?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>It is an external body of wise people who have standing in the eyes of the Government. And I have to say, whose academic and other profile also commends themselves, as a general rule, to the university environment. And that body comes in to run a ruler over the institution. In a way, it is the institutional level equivalent of the professional accreditation bodies that I used to deal with when I was president. I'd carve out a whole week when the medical schools accreditation visiting group was coming to town. The same with each of the three main areas of engineering. Any areas that require accreditation, the president really does need to give attention to. This is not exactly accreditation, but it is a group of people making observation and comments, often in a very gentle way. But it is a case of where someone treads softly, and speaks even more softly, you pay even more attention. I think it is an honourable process, it is a good thing.</p> <p>I think it is important that the university is not expected to necessarily adopt every single recommendation that is made by QAFU, and I think QAFU needs to understand that. As I mentioned, that as long as eighty percent or ninety percent of the recommendations are adopted then, that's fine. But it serves that purpose of making you think about how you're doing things and it's a group of people who deserve to be taken seriously. Of course, the other aspect is they speak to Government and Government being the significant funder of the university is entitled to be informed, from time to time, on how its investment is going.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>There's another group here in Singapore, the International Academic Advisory Panel. Has that had much impact?</p>

<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>It looks at international and strategy and the university in a wider sense. QAFU looks at the operations of the university in a more functional sense. I think probably a couple of the comments I was making about QAFU really drifted into a mental set on the international panel. But the QAFU, it fits into a model that you find in most universities, I think in Australia it's even called QAFU, again in Hong Kong, a similar operation in the UK. QAFU is looking at the quality of what is it that the university is doing. The international panel—which is a bit more unique to Singapore, I don't see that in other universities so much—I think it has a wider view, its membership comes from a wider area across the academic globe. But in principle, they're both doing the same thing—it's an external body that is providing input in the interest of quality and good development for the university.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Could you comment on what might lie ahead in the next phase of development?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>A particular image of SMU that many people will draw in is the jumping student. But sooner or later, that student comes back to earth, gravity prevails. You can't beat gravity. And the move to the second trimester is bringing the student back to earth. That is, a lot of that "jumping-ness" has been promise and excitement and aspiration, but by now we have three years of work experience by students. So if we had shown eight years ago, a student jumping to a whole new career because they've come to SMU, we now know whether that was in fact an accurate representation or whether we were gilding that lily a bit. So that's what I mean about the jumping student coming back to earth. Now we're in a much more realistic period for assessment by people outside.</p> <p>People are aware of us, but we're not in the rankings and there's a reason for that because we haven't had certain qualifications for a long enough period of time. But they see the headlines: NUS and NTU in the top 35 whatever it was, at that time's Higher Education, the Financial Times' ranking. So, we're now in that second period, which at its worst will be the doldrums, but at its best would be the period when you change the sails. But it's one or the other. I don't believe it'll be the first but it's certainly is not a steady continuum on the way through.</p> <p>I think it's very fortunate we've got a new president for this next phase. The previous president was absolutely fit for the purpose of that trimester. Now there is a new trimester. And it's going to be much more of a challenge, I think, in working through the scepticism that's going to come in about—are we as good as we say we are with that jumping student? How we work our way through that will then determine the third trimester which in some respects, at its best, would be the golden age of the university. There will be other periods that are wonderful as well. But it's that third trimester of development, if you avoid the doldrums and get the sail change right, that takes you to that the third stage and that would be a PhD programme where people clamour to get in, international exchanges in recognition.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Can you share some more of your thoughts about Singapore's public policy and how it's guided its universities?</p>

<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>I see this in particular contrast to Hong Kong U, in contrast to Hong Kong. There I was on the University Grants Council, committee council, for nine years. I went off that about a year ago. And that's the body that receives all the funding from the government and then allocates it to the university. It's like an ongoing QAFU, although they have a separate QAFU, but it's like an ongoing international advisory panel. Half are... members of the... university presidents from other universities, including from China. Hong Kong has eight universities. Most of them having been polytechnics elevated, called universities. Australia, prior to let's say the mid-eighties I think it was, had maybe twelve universities, then overnight we had thirty-nine. That is, the government declared a large number of the teachers colleges and polytechnics—universities. And there's a big debate, still goes on, about that. In Australia, the difficulty is there's this egalitarian notion of university funding, so that every university is the same. If you want to become a world-standing university, it's a much harder struggle in Australia because the government does not fund for that to occur.</p> <p>Hong Kong is exactly the same. I did a review for the government on whether we should merge Chinese University of Hong Kong and Science and Technology [Hong Kong University of Science and Technology] and in the end, I think we should have. But in the end, it was impossible. Because if we had, there would have been two world-class universities that you could build, twin peaks. But there was such a fuss from all the foothills that it didn't happen. And the same happens in Australia. The sign of the problem is the ease with which a polytechnic or teachers college is simply declared to be a university.</p> <p>Singapore strikes me as having a very different approach. The way I characterise it is, I come here and I see the Government saying to the polytechnics, there are two things we want to tell you—these are my words; these are not the Government's words—there are two things we want to tell you: one is we're going to fund you, one is you are never going to become a university. If we're going to build a university, it won't be a polytechnic becoming a university. But secondly, we're going to fund you as though you are a university. You are going to get levels of funding that you won't believe as a polytechnic. And that's been my experience. Which means that when you get a new university, such as SMU, it is a greenfield exercise, it comes up, and now SUTD. [Singapore University of Technology and Design].</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>A question just to ask about your experiences. Can you tell us what impact being on SMU's board had on you or what you might have learnt from being on the board?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>To me, personally, it's the people I've met, it's the connections I've made. My wife and I have had some great weekends at Banyan Tree Resorts, which I would not have been aware of had I not encountered KP. That's not exactly a flippant comment, but it shows that there are a number of different dimensions to what you draw. But it's primarily the people, primarily the networks that you manage to build up. And for me, it's not just coming in and sitting in the fourteenth floor board meeting.</p>

	<p>For example, Ean Kuok [Khoon Ean Kuok], trustee member is based at Hong Kong and his family runs and owns the Shangri-La Resorts. There's nothing like having dinner at a Shangri-La hotel in Hong Kong with Ean Kuok; I've never seen such service. So it extends to that. It's getting to meet Victor Fung and then doing the whole Hong Kong University arrangement. The connection with Janice. At the time she called me, I had been president of the professional, international body. She is now the president of that same body. So those paths, connect and cross. I say that personally, that's the biggest single thing I have taken away from being on the board of SMU.</p> <p>The second is, I am—in order to be interested in policy, strategy and change process—I'm not interested in the world being the same when I go to bed as it was when I get up. SMU fits that drumbeat very nicely. It's in an area, it's in a region, it's in a country which pays respect to higher education. Coming from Australia, the funding constantly seems to be cut. The difference I find is this. In Australia I go into a meeting with ministers and you walk into the room knowing—well, you're figuring you know—that they're trying to work out how to tell you no. You go into the room in Singapore—they certainly don't say, well, here's the money you want—but you get the sense that they're trying to work out how to meet what it is that you're putting up. So that was a refreshing experience, breaking away from what I was seeing in Australia to what I saw in Singapore. So it's been a really a really great experience.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>And one final question, any advice for SMU students going forward?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>It's not about setting your career with what you study. That's one of the reasons SMU is so important. It's got the four-year undergraduate programme, it's the North American proposition that you take those four years to learn a lot, settle down, and then decide what your first major area of professional endeavour is going to be. But remember, that's probably only the first. By the time you finish you'll have been through any number of things. I guess what I'll be saying to students is yes, it's great that you got the energy and that you want to be moving as fast as you are, but sometimes you're best to just simply pause and to think about what is it you're doing and to take some time off. A gap year is not something that you only do up between high school and university, because there's a long working life out there that you've got to look forward to.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Anything else you'd like to add, any other?</p>
<p>John Niland:</p>	<p>No, I think you've covered a wide canvas for me, thank you.</p>
<p>Patricia Meyer:</p>	<p>Thank you, thank you very much.</p>

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
AAC	Academic Affairs Committee
FinRem	Finance and Remuneration Committee
IPO	Initial Public Offering
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MOE	Ministry of Education
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
NUS	National University of Singapore
QAFU	Quality Assurance Framework for the Universities
SMU	Singapore Management University
SUTD	Singapore University of Technology and Design
UNSW	University of New South Wales
UPenn	University of Pennsylvania