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### Oral History Interview with Arnoud De Meyer

Arnoud DE MEYER

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## Singapore Management University Libraries

### Oral History

**Interviewee: Arnoud De Meyer**

**Interviewer: Pat Meyer**

**Date: 13 October 2018**

**Location: Li Ka Shing Library, Level 5, Recording Studio**

#### **Full videos located at:**

- Part 1 (28:24) - [https://mediacast.smu.edu.sg/media/OralHistory-Adm-13Sep2018-Part01/0\\_sr194zyz](https://mediacast.smu.edu.sg/media/OralHistory-Adm-13Sep2018-Part01/0_sr194zyz)
- Part 2 (26:47) - [https://mediacast.smu.edu.sg/media/OralHistory-Adm-13Sep2018-Part02/0\\_hqpct4zk](https://mediacast.smu.edu.sg/media/OralHistory-Adm-13Sep2018-Part02/0_hqpct4zk)
- Part 3 (20:12) - [https://mediacast.smu.edu.sg/media/OralHistory-Adm-13Sep2018-Part03/0\\_p3sjm16x](https://mediacast.smu.edu.sg/media/OralHistory-Adm-13Sep2018-Part03/0_p3sjm16x)

### **PART 1**

**Pat Meyer:** I'd like to start by asking you about a move that you made in 2010. You'd been at an established institution, the University of Cambridge. You had responsibilities for MBA and executive education, and you left to become president of a young institution with a majority of undergraduates. Can you tell us about that transition?

**Arnoud De Meyer:** After eight years, I still don't know whether I made the right decision, but I don't look back at it. It was indeed an interesting move, I think a move that, by many people, was not understood at all. I was at the pinnacle of what an academic career could be, for being a don at University of Cambridge, being the dean of the business school. Why would you leave such a place? I've reflected on that several times, and I think there were several factors that, wouldn't say pushed me, but pulled me into SMU. There was no push factor. I was not unhappy in Cambridge. Actually, I was very happy there.

But, first of all, I remember I got that phone call from the search firm and I had said no, I'm not interested. But then they say, would you want to have at least one conversation with Ho Kwon Ping, our chairman? And I sort of owed him something because I had written a case study about Banyan Tree a number of years before. I found him an interesting person. I thought, yes, why not having a coffee or something like that in London while he is there, just also out of curiosity about what SMU had been doing. Because I, as you know from my previous interview, I had known SMU at the beginning of its existence.

In that conversation with Ho Kwon Ping, I felt the enthusiasm, and we all know he's a very persuasive person. He can really convince you. And he said, you at least have to consider it and come and look at it. And looking back, why I in the end took the plunge, is that I've always had a little bit of an entrepreneurial streak in myself. And in a sense, Cambridge was too easy. I liked the challenge of saying you take an incomplete institution, a very young

institution, an institution that just had gone through its sort of first growth pains. You take it and you bring it to a higher level. And I thought that that was an interesting challenge. I also never had thought that I would stay here eight years. I had a term of five years, and I always in my mind, at least when I go back to January 2011 when I did that first interview for the oral history, I remember that it for me it was one term, and then I would move on to something else in the world. So, yes, with hindsight, it has been an interesting experience.

I should add that probably the other pull factor was the idea of coming back to Asia. As you know, I had been living here between 1998 and 2003, had set up the campus of INSEAD here in Asia, and after that I still had a lot of interesting interactions even when I was in Cambridge. I visited very often China, less so Southeast Asia, India. And I felt the buzz, the potential of this region, in particular after the global financial crisis of 2008, where probably Asia came a little bit less scathed out of this global financial crisis. And I saw the potential and I thought I want to be there when it is happening, whatever that 'it' was then, really. Yes, pull factors that pulled me here. Was it the right decision? I really have no clue. Did I enjoy it? Yes, because otherwise I wouldn't have stayed eight years.

**Pat Meyer:** The university as a whole grew and evolved significantly during your presidency. And I want to ask about some key developments or significant developments in different areas, but I'd like to start with undergraduate education. Twenty years ago, when SMU was being founded, one of the distinguishing features at that time was that it was going to have an American-style undergraduate education. So we've come a long way since then. What were your ideas about how the undergraduate education or experience should develop, and what was some of the context for why you wanted to see it develop that way?

**OH Topic Tag: Teaching and Curriculum – Title: Maintaining SMU's competitive edge**

**Arnoud De Meyer:** When I go back to 2010-2011, that first academic year, where I had to learn a lot about the university, one of my observations was that probably the undergraduate program had gone through a cycle and was at the end of its success cycle. The way I say this is that when I came here, everybody was enthusiastic about the model, and I will not repeat it, but we all know about the small class sizes, the holistic education etc. And everybody was enthusiastic and say "Oh, we've been successful because our students find good jobs". But when I was listening around, I got more and more signals that people were saying, "Yes, but you've lost your edge, NUS and NTU are catching up." And yes, it was a great model but they have changed. And it's true, they moved actually much more to an American system also.

So the feeling I started having after a few months is that we were at the end of a cycle in the sense that we had come up with something totally new. In the beginning probably our colleagues had neglected what was SMU doing; then suddenly they discovered that our students got good jobs and higher salaries on the average. And they reacted as one would expect to do, and they gave us the biggest compliment that one can give you by copying what we had been doing successfully. And thus, there was sort of this perception in the market—and I got it very strongly from some employers who said yes, but you're losing the edge, you're losing that differentiation that you had vis-à-vis the other schools, the other universities here in Singapore. So I felt that there was a need for a, I call it a second cycle, but maybe it's just giving it a second impetus. Yes, doing something with the program—not because it was bad but because it was losing its edge, let me put it that way.

So I worked with the teams because the undergraduate is not something that is directly my responsibility as the president. I have to work with the Provost and with Vice Provost for undergraduate education. But I mean it took a bit of time to have the institution realize that we shouldn't become complacent, let me put it that way, right. And so, what I tried to stress is that this holistic education was still very good, but that we had to complement it with other things. And over the years, Provost and Deans have actually reacted quite well to it. So that I believe that today, our program again is much more recognized as being a differentiated program, offering something very different to our students. Things that have contributed to that would be the introduction of SMU-X in the experiential learning, would be the more interdisciplinary degrees or majors such as PLE—Politics, Law and Economics, the Smart-City Management and Technology, more recently the Health Economics and Management. So bringing in new tracks that are aligned with what the industry and employers want to have, the hundred percent overseas exposure that we have decided. Again, it's not that we really transformed completely the undergraduate program, but we got into a mode of innovating every year. And I think that's what really was needed.

I'm actually very happy that when Lily Kong, our Provost came on board that she took actually the bull by the horns and said we're going to actually look at the composition of our core program, something that we knew had become a bit stale after 15-16 years. She took the bull by the horns and actually said we are going to review and revise that core program. Again, significant innovation that will be rolled out over the coming years, and I think that maybe, I put it a bit black and white, but I think that we went from a mode where we said we have something that works very well, we can't touch it, to a mode of yes, we have something that works very well, but we need to innovate every year, and we need to improve every year, and we need to change every year.

The other thing that I strongly emphasized is that we needed to grow a little bit. We were still when I arrived here with an intake of about 1,500. Now we are about 2,150 students. That's a healthy growth. Why do I think that we needed that growth is that, not in the business school, but in the other schools, which we're turning around hundred and eighty, two hundred students per year, bringing them to a higher level allows us to recruit more faculty, to bring in more specializations, put more electives and provide a better portfolio of courses and majors and second majors to our students. I think that, yes, that was what I have to say about the undergraduate program.

**Pat Meyer:** Besides the undergraduates, there has been a strong growth in the postgraduate programmes and enrolment. And can you just summarise some of the key points there and as well as some of the challenges for the growing the postgraduate programme.

**OH Topic Tag: Challenges & Future; Title: Developing SMU into an internationally recognized university**

**Arnoud De Meyer:** I'm going to come back to the first question about why I took the job. I remember that I had a conversation with Ho Kwon Ping, fairly late in the process that we were interacting with each other and where I basically said, and I paraphrase it a bit, I don't know the exact words of the conversation anymore, but what I basically said, I don't understand why you recruit me because SMU is an undergraduate university serving Singapore, and my whole career is about graduate business schools at a very international level, whether it was INSEAD or whether it was Cambridge Judge Business School. So I

don't seem to be the right person for this job. And I still remember that he, again paraphrasing, answered me, that's precisely why we want to have you because we know how to run an undergraduate program in Singapore, but we want to develop the university and make it a more internationally recognized university, and we want to build the postgraduate programs. So I knew what my quote-unquote marching orders were. I was also convinced that to be a good, if not a great university, that SMU needed to increase its portfolio of programs—that included postgraduate master's programs, that included the PhD program and that includes also continuing education in its many different forms, and of course also research, but we can probably talk about that later.

Postgraduate programs, I would say that I was in a sense lucky that Raj, our former provost, was also very much convinced about the role of postgraduate programs. And he brought in Phil Zerrillo, who is the academic entrepreneur by definition I would say. And we basically said, look, let's grow, let a thousand blossoms bloom. There were a few existing programs. There was the Masters of Information Technology in Business, Banking in in those days. There was a very small MBA program that was struggling, and there were a few other small programs in finance, in economics. It's not that there were no programs, but all of them, perhaps with the exception of MITB, were basically struggling and underperforming. Phil, or Dr Z, as everybody calls him, but Phil took on the challenge and grew. He's a grower. Raj [Prof Rajendra Srivastava] was very much supportive of that. Howard Thomas—who also came from Warwick at about the same time as I came here, six months earlier, but who in Warwick had actually been growing the master's programs, the specialized master's programs, the pre-experience programs—he came in with the same sort of enthusiasm and willingness to grow these programs. And so there was this confluence of several people that together as a team said, let's grow these programs.

The challenge is that we, in order to grow, we just couldn't only rely on doing marketing, publishing a few advertisements or whatever. We actually needed to have pipelines of incoming students that probably came from other universities, and that's where I decided to open up channels in China. We did have an existing channel with Xiamen University where we had signed an agreement, I think in 2007, for our Masters of Applied Finance. And when I looked at that, and understood how that worked, I thought this model must be able to work with other universities too. So in 2012, I decided to go to China, open up the doors there with many different universities and basically offer them the idea of a joint or double degree program, whereby they would send us a number of Chinese students into our programs. That has been actually quite successful.

Challenges today, I would say we've grown fast, and I think we are now going through a consolidation phase. Not so much growth in numbers anymore, but growth in quality of the intake. In the meantime, we've actually been able to submit these programs to some of these rankings. We've gotten a few good rankings for some programs and that has given us visibility, that has given us credibility, I would say. So, the sales of the programs internationally has become a lot easier. And so, I think, we are now in the right position to say we have a good size type of program. Let's now still grow it, but maybe not at the frantic pace that we had in the beginning, but at a slower pace. But let's focus on quality. Let's make sure that we also find good jobs for the people that graduate from our programs. Yes, I think those are the three elements that I would highlight. That is a team that was willing to grow it,

an opening up to China that has been quite successful, and then the rankings that have been actually helping us in achieving visibility.

**Pat Meyer:** You mentioned research. What are some of the developments, key developments in SMU's research, and why are they important for SMU and for Singapore?

**Arnoud De Meyer:** I was re-reading the interview of 2011, and I will repeat something that I said then. That is, that at that moment we had a very strong group of very young faculty members who were academically very visible because they published in the top journals, but we had no visibility or impact in Singapore. I mentioned at that moment that we needed more impact through our research and that that probably would come from interdisciplinary research.

**OH Topic Tag: Research – Title: SMU research and its impact on society in Singapore**

I will add another anecdote. I had after a few months that I was here at a lunch with Tommy Koh, and he may not remember it anymore, but he asked me during that lunch, “Does SMU do any research?” And I was a bit taken aback by that question and sort of probably answered at that moment, “Yes, look at all the academic publications and all the A-journals that our faculty are publishing.” But frankly speaking, he said “I’ve never seen anything of that in Singapore.” Sometimes these sort of simple remarks that people make stick with you and say what was he really telling there. And what he basically was saying, it may be great what kind of research you are doing as an institution, but we in Singapore don’t benefit from it.

So I have been hammering over the last eight years—hammering is maybe a strong word, right?—say I’ve been repeating several times that yes, we need to do top-quality research, but it does have to have impact on Singapore society. I have to say that the Deans be it, Bryce Hool in Economics, Steve Miller in IS [Information Systems], Gerry George and before him, Howard Thomas, in the Business School—I should mention them all—Cheng Qiang or Goh Yihan in Law School and in Accountancy, they have all taken on the challenge of; we need to have larger scale research projects, we need to be more interdisciplinary and we need to look at what it is in our research that can be of relevance to the society here. So we see that today, compared to 2011 or 2010, the number of external grants that we get from the government has risen very significantly, that the type of research is now much more a portfolio of topics. Yes, still for our young academics, they need to build a reputation in the international academic world, so they publish about their PhDs and in top journals. But at the same time, we have now large-scale research projects that are of relevance to Singapore. I can mention that all the programs like iCity or LARC or whatever in IS, I can mention the CREA—the Centre for Research on Economics of Ageing in Economics. But also more recently, the retail centre in the Business School, or the real estate applied research activity in the Business School together with Economics, or what Yihan has been doing in the School of Law, with governance of artificial intelligence. These are topics that are directly responding to the needs of the Singapore society.

I think that is the biggest change, and at the same time we see in the results—and I refer then to some of these research rankings for the Business School or for the School of Accountancy and the School of Information Systems—we see in these rankings that are based purely on research publications that we have actually made a lot of progress. So, on the both tracks,

more academically, international, traditional, top-quality journals, as well as on the impact on the local society, I think we've made a lot of progress.

Sort of before I answered directly that question, let me say a few words about alumni. Our alumni are still very young. When I came here in 2010, the oldest alumni had graduated six years before. Even today, 2018, the first alumni graduating—if I take away some of the very small postgraduate programs in finance that already graduated in 2002—the first batch of graduates date from 2004. They're fourteen years out there in the job. This is a very young group of alumni.

We still are developing how to work with alumni. The young alumni are often very similar to our students and are looking for networking, sports, games, having fun. I know from experience that in Cambridge or in INSEAD that older alumni are looking more for professional updates, for perhaps high-level networking. But indeed, their needs are changing and we are developing together with our alumni, along that growth of alumna, of the growth and getting older for the alumni.

Sorry, I realized, now of course comes the president who's thinking about fundraising with alumni. I realized that we, for the next 10 years, probably will not have major donations by alumni. There are some exceptions, there are some successful entrepreneurs who already can give at younger age and have been very successful and are helping indeed, SMU. But I realized that we needed to have a different approach, not only to do fundraising but also to raise our profile in our surrounding countries, in Southeast Asian countries. And when I say raising profile, that is also to be able to attract postgraduate students, to attract perhaps support for research programs etc. And so then I looked around and what is it that I can do? And I remembered my days at INSEAD where we had these international councils. And I thought that is a great way of building up visibility in different countries. The idea is that in the countries that are surrounding us—we've done it now in Bangkok, in Rangoon, in Myanmar, in Jakarta in Indonesia, in Vietnam (in first instance in Ho Chi Minh City, but we probably will move around and also go to Hanoi), in Hong Kong for China, and in Manila for the Philippines—we've created actually international councils which is usually a combination of very visible business leaders, the local president of the alumni chapter, perhaps somebody from the government and/or academia who is very influential. But advisory councils, usually of about 10 to 12 people who can actually help us with growing in these different countries by providing access to jobs sometimes, access to internships, helping our entrepreneurs perhaps to build their markets in these countries, and, in general, as I said, and I repeat myself, raising the profile of SMU in these countries.

What's in it for them? I think that most of them are enjoying to be associated with a fast-growing university in Singapore. They hope that SMU can help their different countries. There is also a networking element to it. That is, we brought them together for our international council here in Singapore on the 16th of August of this year. And, yes, I think they get something out of networking and the feeling that SMU can contribute to their countries. In other cases, I have noticed that some of these very visible business people actually enjoy interacting with our alumni. Because in Myanmar, for example, Serge Pun, who is the chair of our council there, discovered that there was a whole group of SMU graduates—Burmese, but with a very international education—and that was actually a very good group for him to think about how can these people help the country and help him in

building the country. So, yes, I think it has been a successful move that we have made. I'm sure that in the coming years, we will have to renew these councils, that we will perhaps add a few more. I think, for example, that we could do one in Malaysia or in India, but I think the system has been put in place.

## **PART 2**

**Pat Meyer:** Besides the growth in enrolment, programs, research over the last eight years, there are major changes to the SMU physical campus. What were some of the highlights and headaches for you, and how have these changes impacted the students' experience?

**Arnoud De Meyer:** When I came here, my predecessor, Professor Howard Hunter shared, with me that, there had been a plan or there was a plan to build a School of Law. There was a piece of land that was earmarked for it, and there were ongoing negotiations with the Ministry of Education, and behind the Ministry of Education, of course, also Ministry of Finance about financing that building.

We needed to overcome one mental hurdle, which was easy for me to overcome but not for the university, as such, is that the Ministry of Finance made or the Ministry of Education, I should say, made it very clear that they were not going to finance the full building, that we would have to come up with some own funding. It was interesting for me—coming from where I came from, in particular, INSEAD, where we had always financed all buildings out of our revenues, as a company would do—that there was this actually mental hurdle within the organisation, and within even the Board of Trustees, that we're not going to build for buildings, that is the government's role. So there was a first element to work on, and that is look, we can actually afford to finance part of the building out of our revenues. I had made very quickly the calculation; it was really not an issue for the university to do so. And once we had gotten over that mental hurdle—that part of the building could be financed by us—then we got into the design of the building. I, together with our Chairman, we decided that we wanted to have a radically different architecture. There were some voices that said we should remain in the same style as the rest of the campus. And among the five projects that were submitted to us, there was at least one, if not two, that were very, very similar to the rest of the campus. I thought it was important to radically break and to come up with a different iconic building for SMU. So I'm happy that we could realize that School of Law. It took a lot more time than probably what Howard Hunter had initially thought. Because, I have to say, the Minister of Education was a bit slow in approving some of the financing of it. But in the end, it was a very successful project.

### **OH Topic Tag: Campus – Title: Renovating Campus Green**

The two other ones that I personally invested a lot in and is that one, I felt that our Campus Green was not very well used. In fact, it was told to me by many other people that the original idea of putting SMU in the centre of the city was to create a buzz in the city. And people were saying, but we never see anybody on your Campus Green. There is no buzz, they are all underground. And so I took it as a sort of a challenge to respond to people who had actually believed in SMU, in the centre of the city and hoped that it would create a buzz. I took it as a challenge and said what can I do to bring the students above ground? I actually talked a lot to students about why they didn't get above, and the answers were quite straightforward—that is, there is air conditioning below and there is nothing above. But,



actually, more importantly, they basically said look at the Campus Green, it's very uneven. There's a little slope from Bras Basah Road to Stamford Road, so you can't even do really sports on it. As soon as it rains, it is a big mud pool. This is not really a useful Campus Green.

So, as you know, we invested about \$20 million in renovating a number of existing buildings and the Campus Green. At the same time, we created a number of study spaces for students, and we revamped a little bit, the library. So it was a whole project of having a second look at our campus, and say, with the experience of six, seven years on the new campus, what can we do differently here? I remember that when I went walking with Mr Sim, who was in that time in charge of operations, among other things, that we went walking through the campus and said, where are their spaces that are unused and what can we do with them?

And so, for example, in the School of Social Sciences and Economics, that particular building, there was an inner garden, sort of an atrium that was never used by anybody. Why not cover it and make it a study space, right? Or turn it into lecture theatres? And we went through the campus, and there was a whole renovation project that had to do with how can we use the square meters that we have—these very expensive square meters that we have here in the centre of the city—how can we use them better? And in that context, we had the whole revamp of the Campus Green.

I am particularly proud of a decision that we took to make sure that the Campus Green was very well-drained. And, as many people will know when they look very carefully, we actually have artificial turf there. Why not grass? Because artificial turf and with good drainage is dry within 30 minutes after a rain. So it can be used, as opposed to become a mud pool. Grass is not necessarily the best thing for a tropic climate. So that's the second renovation. And it has actually had impact in many different places in the campus. It was a relooking at what we had and say how can we use it better?

### **OH Topic Tag: Campus – Title: Renovating Prinsep Street Residences**

The third infrastructure change was of, course, the renovation of the Prinsep Street Residences. We have these residences with about, in those days about 270 beds. But when I went to visit them, I thought that the buildings looked very nice, but when I went into the apartments, I was not very much convinced about the way that they were equipped and organized. And, frankly speaking, after about 10 years, they were up for some renovation because the rooms looked very tired. I was very happy that our Provost had this idea of saying, if we do the renovation, can we do this at the same time with a totally different look at how we use these residences. Not just dormitories, but actually make them active living, learning and working spaces where students have a real community and work as a community for the community around them. So again, it's a good example of collaboration of different groups in the campus. Of course, the Dean of Students who took charge of it, Provost who give the impetus to it, OCIS, the Office for Campus Infrastructure and Services who took it up on them to do the renovation. And I'm very happy that in about six months' time, we could do the renovation of the Prinsep Street Residences.

### **OH Topic Tag: Campus – Title: SMU-X Building**

And now, we did the ground-breaking a few weeks ago of what will be the SMU-X building which we will call the Tahir Foundation Connexion. Why that building? Well, as you know, a

few years ago, I came up with this idea of stimulating experiential learning in the undergraduate program. I should be honest, this was not my idea. This is the idea of some faculty who were doing this on a small scale. What I did was basically saying this is a great idea for our undergraduate students. What can we do to scale it up? As opposed to be some small activity that we do in some of our postgraduate programs, in some courses in the undergraduate program. How can we make this a major component of the undergraduate experience at SMU? Mr Sim, who was very enthusiastic about the idea—he actually believed in it—he sort of came up with the idea that this building, that the former MPH building, Vanguard building that that building was available for rent. And whether it would be a good idea for us to try out, whether, with a different type of infrastructure, we could stimulate and support the SMU-X pedagogy. I have to say that, again, I was lucky to have a good team, that Tan Gan Hup as project manager rose to the challenge. We went around the world to see how other universities organizes that. And with a real shoestring budget, they revamped the MPH building and made it into SMU Labs, as we know it, where there is a lot more support for group work, interaction between students, etc.

This has been a good pilot project for us. We've learned a lot from how students use that building. I'm very grateful, I should say, that at some moment in time, Ascott saw what we were doing thought it was a very good idea to collaborate with us, to test out what Millennials really want to have in terms of environment to work in. So that we could actually after two years take some of the very tired furniture out of that building and replace it with some new ideas. Again, testing out some funky ideas. But we've learned a lot from that experiment or that pilot. So that by the time, we were ready to build a new building of about 8,000 square meters, we knew what we needed to do to support that different type of pedagogy that we call SMU-X—of experiential learning, active classrooms, active learning classrooms, different types of meeting rooms and project rooms. We will also house our Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship incubator there. So it will be the building where students can learn in a different mode from what we do elsewhere in the schools, and it will be a nice complement to what we are doing through our holistic education.

In that building, we probably will be a world leader in what we provide as support for active learning. I'm not saying that nobody else in the world is doing this. There are other universities that are experimenting with different types of infrastructure. I believe that we are probably the only one who is doing this sort of active learning, experiential learning on such a large scale in an undergraduate program. There are lots of examples that I know in graduate programs on smaller scale, but not the large scale that we are embarking on. Having 3,000 students going every year through this type of projects, and experiential learning, 150 to 200 partners, 500 projects—that scale is quite a challenge, I have to say. And for that scale of project work, we need to have the right physical environment. That includes actually also some sleeping pods where students can stay overnight and catch a quick nap, to be able to work perhaps 24 hours. I'm not saying that students should do that, but one should...

**Pat Meyer:** Recharge a little bit?

**Arnoud De Meyer:** Well, and we should give them the option. We should give them the possibility to do so. I think when I look back on the last eight years, the campus footprint has changed quite considerably. And it's amazing that on this relatively small piece of land,

which is between four to five hectares, that we can actually house 12,000 people, if I take students and staff together.

**Pat Meyer:** Just want to quickly look at the finances for these new Connexion Building and the design of buildings. And again, it is going to be iconic or distinct from the initial buildings.

**Arnoud De Meyer:** When I come to the financing, I'm going to answer another question. Sorry, but something that throughout my eight years has really kept me, not awake at night, but that it was an important driver in all of my thinking and action. When I came here in 2010, 2011, one of the first things that I noticed was the shrinking cohort, the shrinking student cohort. We are still, but we were at that moment an almost exclusively undergraduate university, and as I often say jokingly, I am in a business that has a unique aspect—that is that I know my market 18 years beforehand, right? I can look at the number of babies born in a particular year and project what the market for university education will be in 18 years from now.

I didn't have to do the 18 years' projection. I just looked at the number of students in primary one in 2010 and I realized that by 2022, the universities in Singapore would have a serious issue. I'm not going to go through all the details, but if I think about—and this is a bit of a simplistic reasoning that I now make—but at the peak of the cohort, that was 2016, we could, we, that is all the universities could recruit from a cohort of 48,000 young men and women. The cohort participation rate, as decided by the Minister of Education, was 30 percent. So we know what the market is from which the universities can actually draw, and then the competition is about the best students, etc. But you know, more or less, what your market is—48,000 in 2016 with a participation rate of 30 percent. We know what it is, let's say around 16,000 students. The number of babies born in today or in 2016 is around 33,000, 48,000 to 33,000. Now I know that is not going to be necessarily the cohort in 18 years later, because there is migration, there are some changes in the composition of the population, etc. But you can predict that it probably will be 35, 36,000 by the time they're 18 or 21, 22 for the young men. I realized that even with a core participation rate of 40%, as MOE was talking about, that we would have less students for our undergraduate program, and while that for a large university like NUS or NTU may not have been such a challenge—I leave it to them to say whether they see it as a challenge or not—for a small university like ours, where the number of faculty is always related to the number of students. I mean we have a sort of faculty-student ratio from one to about 20. It means that if you have 200 students less per year or 800 students less over the four years, then you actually have to have 40 faculty less. For a small university, that could be a killer because it would basically mean we don't have enough faculty.

Thus, apart from the marching orders I got from our Chairman about postgraduate education and internationalization, I realized that I needed to diversify the sources of revenue for SMU. We needed to have postgraduate programs on top of the undergraduate programs as revenue, for further revenues, and the margins that we get on them. We needed to have more continuing education, we needed to have more external research funding with overheads on it, and we needed to increase our fundraising. At that moment, we had in terms of endowment and reserves around 650 to 700 million dollars, and we have a strict spending rule imposed by our Board of Trustees of three percent which means three percent on six hundred, let's say

700 million—that's around 20 to 21 million per year that I could use. I calculated that that was not sufficient in the long run for this university. So we needed to build up our endowment, we needed to build up our reserves that we have as a university. I'm quite pleased to say that at this moment we are about \$1,375 million as endowment and reserves. So we have basically almost doubled what we have in terms of endowment and reserves.

And then I come to your question about financing the building. Ministry of Education had also told us after the School of Law that from now onwards, they would not finance anything anymore. I hope this position will change in the future. But we realized that for the SMU-X building that we needed to find independent financing. So we're very lucky that we got support from a significant donor, Dr Tahir and the Tahir Foundation for the financing of this building.

### OH Topic Tag: Campus – Title: Designing SMU-X Building

Design - it is going to be very interesting design for three reasons. That first of all, together with BCA, and I should say that the Building and Construction Authority of Singapore has been a very good partner in a sense that they challenged us and then also helped us. But with the help of BCA, we decided that we wanted to look at a different type of construction. We use a lot of wood, mass engineered timber, and that had enormous impact on the design of the building because contrary to normal construction here in Singapore, everything for a mass engineered timber building needs to be produced in the factory in Europe. So you have to have your design—up to the smallest detail—ready because when it arrives, it's like a Meccano or a Lego-type of a building, you just assemble it, and you can't change it anymore. So it is a very different way of thinking about a design of the building with that mass engineered timber. The big advantage for us and one of the many reasons why I am full heartedly behind it is that it will go much faster in terms of building, and there will be far less people on the site and will be far less noise. And given the fact that building is to be built just in between our School of Accountancy and our School of Law, I'm very happy that I can reduce the time of building and noise. In other words, nuisance for both neighbouring schools.

But there are many other reasons why I'm happy to do that. It is also a way of construction that has far less impact on the environment, and I believe strongly in sustainability, so that's another reason why I like this building. Leads me to the second point why this building is very different. We again rose to the challenge of BCA to make this a zero net energy building. In other words, we need energy, it's not that there is no energy needed for air-conditioning or for lights or whatever. But we will produce all of our energy with photovoltaic cells on top of the building and the covering of the passage that we have next to it. So, but that of course, also not only required photovoltaic cells, but also a very different design of the building because you need to actually first of all make sure that your building requires less energy. So it requires a different type of façade. It requires a lot more natural ventilation in the public spaces, as we already did in our School of Law. It requires a different design to ensure that we consume far less energy. I'm happy that our architect raised to the challenge also and was willing to collaborate with us because for them it's also very new because they had never designed the building this mass engineered timber. They have never designed really a building that had zero net energy. So it's a good partnership between them and us. That's the second element of the design that is actually very interesting. And I hope

that once we are there, we will be the first building that is net zero energy in the central business district.

The third element of the design is that it's actually a very flexible building. In fact, we built only open floors, and then we create the interior design through furniture. Of course, you need to have the bathrooms and the showers and whatever, and that needs to be fixed. But all the rest is flexible. So we will not build walls, but what we're going to build is panels that can be moved. We will work with furniture to create special areas in the building. So it's going to be a very interesting and very flexible building. If, after five years, we discover that the way students interact with each other, learn is changing, we will be able to have the flexibility to adjust the building to the changing needs of our students.

### **PART 3**

**Pat Meyer:** Following up on the discussion of Tahir Foundation Connexion building, would you just comment more generally on sustainability as communities and people and looking to the future about what you see as important there?

**Arnoud De Meyer:** When I came to Singapore in 2010 and had been here for a while, I observed for myself that the attitude towards sustainability here was very different from what I had seen in the United Kingdom. Not that there is no investment in sustainability, the National Environment Agency has a number of programs. But my feeling was that here, to a large extent, the population looks at the government and says, tell us what to do, and business also says, tell us what the rules are and we will abide by the rules. But I came from an environment where actually business was often in the leadership role in terms of thinking about how can we create a more sustainable world, a world where the planet doesn't consume itself twice a year, in a sense. I remembered that the chairman of my advisory board at the Cambridge Business School, Lord John Browne, who was then the CEO of BP, had repositioned BP as 'beyond petroleum' and had invested a lot in sustainability and stimulating sustainability. Now these things evolve, and I don't know where they stand at this stage, but I really felt that this attitude— of let's listen to what the government has to tell us, let's see what the rules are about sustainability, and let's just abide by the rules— that was not enough in the long term.

This was reinforced by an experience I had with one of our exchange students. You may know that every month I invite students for the sandwich lunch. My assistant sends out a mail to all the students and says the first 20 that sign up can get a free sandwich and discussion with the president. And then sometimes we do special groups, like the freshmen or the last-year students or the exchange students. And I still remember that I had a group of exchange students—this must have been 2013 or 2014—where I had a discussion about how I had come to Singapore and what I felt about Singapore. And then I usually ask them and what do you think about Singapore, and what is your experiences. And as usual, these exchange students are very pleased with their experience here, are full of admiration of what has been achieved here. But I remembered that this Dutch young man suddenly broke out and said, "But this country still lives in the 20th century when it comes to sustainability. They still use plastic bags in the shops." And I was sort of—actually, the whole group, most of them were Europeans I have to say, Northern Europeans—the whole group was saying, "Yes, that's right." I mean on campus we can do selective collection of waste, but everywhere else that doesn't seem to happen. So it was sort of a reinforcement for an own idea that I had, that is

that we need to do more about the mind-set change about sustainability. We can build buildings that are more efficient in terms of energy consumption. We can build buildings that have a smaller carbon footprint. But if we don't change the attitude of our students and staff around sustainability, all these efforts probably will have only a marginal effect.

**OH Topic Tag: Campus – Title: Building a culture of sustainability**

So while at the same time I refer to the building, the Tahir Connexion, the Tahir Foundation Connexion Building that will be zero net energy, we also will put photovoltaic cells on the other buildings, on our other roofs so that we can reduce our electricity bill. We've actually been very careful with water, and we consume a lot less water than we did in 2010. But, at the same time, I felt that there was a need for an attitude change, and that's where Bernie Toh raised again to the challenge of coming up with this idea of 'Grow', having an urban garden where you involve students and staff in sort of tending the garden. Bringing perhaps some people from the neighbourhoods around us to that garden, and have an interaction between students and some of the elderly people that live in our close neighbourhood. But also the ugly foods market, convincing Kofu to get rid of the plastic straws and replacing them with other straws or no straws whatsoever. These are all very small little things, but they add up to a different view of what sustainability is and how we use planet Earth. And I hope that that will continue after I leave because I think that a university should have a leadership role in sustainability.

I have also stimulated very strongly our own faculty to start thinking about, can we form a centre around sustainability management. And we're not going to go as a management university, we're not going to study technical solutions, but perhaps we can think about how do we do sustainability management, and how do we change attitudes. And hopefully then in the coming months or in the coming years, we will be able to create a centre around sustainability management, that again will be an interdisciplinary centre that brings together the competencies from the different schools.

**Pat Meyer:** I wanted to ask you to just summarise a little bit about university management. How did you assessed it when you came here in 2010 and priorities for how you wanted to strengthen or improve that?

**OH Topic Tag: President – Title: Goals as President**

**Arnoud De Meyer:** First of all, I believe that a president is only a first among equals at a university. To some extent, a university is an organization or even an organism I would say, sort of an ecosystem where many people take individual decisions, have their own creative ideas. And in very, many cases, they don't even need to have a lot of KPIs and objectives, they know what is needed to be done. They're intelligent people. Our faculty, our senior management—they know what to do. What I believe is my role is ensuring that they know where we go, sort of having—I don't even call it a strategy—I call it a vision, and that's the Vision 2025 that guides their decision-making, that gives them the broad context in which they have to move and where they have to go. And so I hope that over the years, by repeating my Vision 2025, by putting the incentives sometimes there where I can nudge people to go in that direction, that I have been able to succeed in growing this university in the right direction. It could have grown in all kinds of ways, but that it has grown in the right direction to become a great social sciences university in this part of the world. So that's my first point,

that is as a president for the university—I think it's very different from a CEO of a company, where you go for a very detailed strategy and that is then translated in all kinds of sub-objectives and sub-strategies and KPIs, and I personally don't believe too much in that for a university. As I said, I believe in that broad framework.

The second driver in my management of the university is that I hope that people find this a pleasant place to work and all people. Now I know, I look at some of those websites that tell us of how displeased people are sometimes with their employers. I know that some people leave us and are unhappy. I always see that a failure for the university. We should create an environment in which people feel welcome and feel that they can develop themselves, and that they can actually use their best competencies in the best way. So, I hope that we can create that environment for our staff and faculty here at the university.

The third principle that I have is that I hope that people will collaborate. Now that is not easy at SMU. Universities all over the world are organized in a functional way—per school, per discipline. It's actually the nature of how we are organized. We are, if I would exaggerate a bit, we are universities—I say not SMU in particular, but all universities—we tend to be organized in silos, and it goes to the DNA of what a university is all about. But this is reinforced at SMU by our architecture where all the schools are in different buildings. And where, if you're in the School of Law, and I'm talking about faculty and staff now, they very rarely probably get into the School of Social Sciences and Economics at the other side of the campus. Perhaps, students move a bit more around because they take classes in different buildings and whatever. But overall, our architecture tends to reinforce this silo. So there is a big challenge, and I'm not sure I've always been very successful in ensuring that people collaborate across the different departments in the different schools.

But those I see as my three goals, that is clearly creating a vision, so that people can take initiative can be intra-preneurs, internally to the organization, ensuring that people know where they have to go and setting a vision. Secondly, ensuring that employees who come here feel that this is a welcoming environment, where they can deploy their capabilities and their competencies. And thirdly, hopefully working closely together with each other.

**Pat Meyer:** Coming to the conclusion of our interview, I'd like to just ask about your opinions on Singapore government's efforts to shape the educational scene here, and what impact do you think that SMU has had on that? And I'd like to also just remind people that your efforts in Singapore had been acknowledged when you received the Public Service Award.

**OH Topic Tag: Concepts & Values – Title: Support from the government**

**Arnoud De Meyer:** Frankly speaking, SMU would not be where it is after 18 years, if it would not have been for the unwavering support by the government. Yes, they are challenging and they have their own objectives and their own expectations. But overall—and I travel a lot—there are very few governments in the world that have such an unrelenting commitment to education. And not only at the university level, but also at other levels. Of course, that unrelenting commitment is translated in resources, the financial resources that the government makes available per undergraduate student, not for the masters students which are all full fee-paying, but per undergraduate students there's a significant commitment by the Ministry of Education and by the government as a whole.



Secondly, I am quite impressed by the willingness of the Ministry of Education to let us experiment and to let us be different. This whole concept of an autonomous university whereby we are, on paper, a private company—I mean a company by guarantee that has the right to grant degrees by an Act of Parliament and where we have a performance and a policy agreement with the government—it's a very interesting way of organizing universities because it ensures that universities are aligned with the goals of the country. But at the same time, it gives the management of universities sufficient freedom to run the place the way the management wants to run the place. And as a consequence, we end up with very different universities. There is no cookie-cutter approach to what a university needs to be. But NUS and NTU, two comprehensive universities, but a very different accent and emphasis than the two specialized research universities, SUTD and SMU, and then we have two very strong more teaching-oriented universities. I'm not saying that they don't do research, but the emphasis is probably slightly different in SIT and SUSS, where the emphasis is more on education for special groups—SIT more for students coming out of the poly, SUSS very often for people who want to have a second chance to study, may want to go through a part-time program. So I'm quite impressed by the willingness of the government to allow these different institutions grow and blossom and each build up their own strong identity. So those two lead to probably a very strong educational sector.

I should add to that that we are benefitting today from changes that were made in early 2000s in the primary and secondary schooling system. There was always this criticism about Singapore education—that it was too much rote learning, that it didn't stimulate creativity. But I think that the early 2000s, the government started changing this. Now a change like that is not easy to implement because you have a large group of teachers who have to be completely transformed. And so, that takes time, but I do see today the results in the incoming cohorts of these changes that started in 2004-2005. And it was not, I was not surprised to read two weeks ago in *The Economist* an article that was praising Singapore for having one of the best educational systems in the world.

**Pat Meyer:** I'd like to conclude by asking two questions. Can you tell us about what your next chapter will be after SMU and any advice you have for SMU's alumni and students?

**Arnoud De Meyer:** I wanted to retire and have an easy life, but our Chairman has not allowed me to do so, and he has convinced me to stay on for 40% of my time as a faculty member at SMU. And then the other 60%, I probably will have a portfolio of different projects, a freer life I would say. One of the characteristics of this job that I have now, is that your diary is actually planned a year in advance almost, and you are—I'm not saying that I don't have degrees of freedom—but to large extent my schedule is determined by what the university expects me to do. I look forward to having a life where I perhaps have a bit more freedom in determining what my activities will be. I hope to finish a book, maybe write another one. I will travel a little bit and have accepted one or two board memberships so that I still stay in contact with what industry is doing. Yes, that's what I'm going to do.

### OH Topic Tag: Advice for students – Grasping opportunities

Advice, for our alumni, yes, it's what I always say to the students when they come for the sandwich lunches. Very often, they sort of ask, one way or another, the question whether I planned to be president of a university in Singapore by the time I graduated from my engineering studies. And I always have to tell them, I never wanted to work in academia, and



when I graduated in 1976 as engineer, I don't think I really knew where Singapore was. So, when I look at my own career, it's more one of grasping opportunities. Saying yes sometimes before you're fully ready to take on a new job. But, yes, be adaptable, continue to learn, continue to inform yourself and grasp the opportunities. And in particular, do what you like to do—that's my only advice.

#### Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
BCA	Building and Construction Authority
EDB	Economic Development Board
KPI	Key performance indicators
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MITB	Masters of IT in Business
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MOE	Ministry of Education
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
OCBC	Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation
SIT	Singapore Institute of Technology
SMU	Singapore Management University
SUTD	Singapore University of Technology and Design