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### Oral History Interview with Timothy Clark

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**Singapore Management University Libraries  
Oral History**

**Interviewee: Timothy Clark**

**Interviewer: Pat Meyer**

**Date: 7 August 2019**

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

**Full video located at:**

[https://mediacast.smu.edu.sg/media/Prof+Timothy+Clark+-+7+Nov+2019/0\\_07yil83q/](https://mediacast.smu.edu.sg/media/Prof+Timothy+Clark+-+7+Nov+2019/0_07yil83q/)

**Pat Meyer:** This is Pat Meyer. Today is Wednesday, 7th August 2019. This interview is part of SMU's oral history project. Today I will be speaking with Professor Timothy Clark who was recently appointed as the fourth provost of SMU. We're meeting in the recording studio of the Li Ka Shing Library, at Singapore Management University. As you became provost of SMU just over four months ago, we would like to get to know you, something about your views on university education and about your aspirations for SMU. And just to begin, we would like to ask you to tell us a bit about your background and how you came to be an academic.

**Timothy Clark:** I was born in 1964, but I am not going to take you through every year of my life. I may just focus on a couple of seminal events. I think fundamentally why I became an academic is because I am interested in ideas and thinking deeply about ideas. And when I went to university, I kind of caught the bug of doing research, thinking about topics and issues, building argument structures and thinking of novel ways of considering ideas. My father and stepfather were in the army, so I travelled quite a lot as a child, moving every few years. As a consequence, I went to boarding school and that boarding school was in a town called Bath in the UK. And I think it wasn't until really I did my A-levels that I started to learn that you could really think deeply about issues. And I did an AS-level and then an A-level in politics and economics, and I found it absolutely inspirational. I found the teaching inspirational. I found the content of the course inspirational. I, without knowing it, approached the whole experience as if I was at university. What I mean by that is I attended the classes, and then I started to read really widely around the subject, and I got hold of the curriculum, and I started to teach myself about aspects of the curriculum, going much much more deeply than we did in class. I did very well in that particular A-level, I got an A in it, and I applied to university to study political studies.

So my first year at university—I went to Leicester University in the UK—I found the curriculum was extremely interesting, in that you could essentially study three social sciences. And so I did economic and social history, I did sociology and I did political studies. The idea was that you would choose one to go on into your second and third years. And I found, to be honest, I found the political studies course in the first year a bit repetitive in relation to my A-levels. So I decided to do sociology in my second and third years, and the range of the topics, the nature of the teaching and the significance of the issues that we were considering and the sort of depth. I learned very quickly that there is always a book or an article on something and that somebody somewhere has thought about an issue before you. The key thing is to find out about that early

thinking. I got very used to doing very detailed literature reviews and essentially trying to connect lots of ideas into coherent arguments to write essays.

When I left university—and in a sense I say these things now, but I don't think I realized them at the time, so this is me constructing my journey. When I left university, I got a job as a research analyst essentially for a charity called the National Children's Home. NCH doesn't exist anymore, but it's a Methodist charity, and originally it ran orphanages. And essentially, they employed me to do a research study of single-parent mothers in a particular area of a town called Salisbury. And I realized that I was quite good at research, and I realized I could put all my skills from my dissertation and my university reading and that sort of discipline to work. And I did a pretty good study. And it had impact and it led to changes, and I thought, what should I do next? And I just happened to chance upon an advert for PhD scholarships, and I applied to that advert and I was fortunate in getting one of them.

After my PhD, I became a management consultant, I did that for about a year, just over a year. And as I was nearing the end of this year, I was reflecting on was I really enjoying it. And I was doing lots of, in quotes, important work—working with some well-known clients, doing interesting projects, big projects and so forth. But I was feeling pretty dissatisfied by the sort of evidence base that we were presenting and developing. And so I became fundamentally, I became an academic because of my experience of being a management consultant made me realise that actually what I really loved was that depth of thinking, being able to have the freedom to think in the way that you want, constructing those arguments based upon literature reviews and novel research, without the constraints of a client project.

And so I left consulting and I applied for a job at the Open University, and then got that and decided to leave consulting. So fundamentally what drove me, I think, was those early experiences of doing that A-level, and that was built upon in my undergraduate life, and then I think further honed through my PhD. Then when I became a consultant, I realized that actually I had come to love doing academic research without realizing it and then applied for a job at the OU.

**Pat Meyer:** Thank you. Can you tell us about your early visits to Singapore? What brought you here and what were your impressions?

**Timothy Clark:** I have been coming to Singapore off and on for must be well over a decade. I can't remember. I think the first time I came to Singapore, my son was about 1 or 2, and I was on my way to Australia. And so that actually would be about 18 years ago because he is 20 now. And I just came as a tourist, and I stayed in a hotel off Orchard Road and explored Singapore, Little India, Chinatown, Orchard Road for a couple of days, both on the way to Australia, on the way back from Australia. And my immediate impression of Singapore was that it was a city that was very easy to find your way around, and it had a good climate. Although, now I live here, the humidity does take a bit of getting used to. It was very customer focused. I remember just how friendly people were in the hotel, and how my son spilled something, and people wanted to help. But just really leaving with a very good impression of the cultural aspects of Singapore as well as Orchard Road, and a real sense of friendliness from the people I had met.

And then off and on, when I worked at Durham University, as I started work there in 2002, I was asked to do a review of what was then called the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT). There were a number of UK universities that were thinking of developing a partnership with it, including us. And I came here for three or four days and spoke to people both in the university and in the government, and we did essentially an evaluation of SIT. We decided not to embark on a collaboration but a neighbouring university, Newcastle, did. And so again, I got to know a bit more about Singapore, travelled a bit further around the island. And then I edited a journal with somebody who was based at NUS and got to know second-hand a lot more about the university system, and we recruited a number of people from NTU and NUS into Durham University.

And then in addition, I have come several times as a tourist once again, travelling to Borneo and traveling elsewhere, and so built a familiarity over the years. And I have also been working, although not in Singapore, I started to do some work a few years ago for the Quality Assurance Council in Hong Kong and so started to build a more comparative picture of higher education systems in the region. So that is my familiarity with Singapore.

**Pat Meyer:** That is very interesting. You said you have been at Durham since 2002, a larger, more established university with a long history. What sparked your interest to come to SMU?

***Selected for Oral History website: Topic: Starting at SMU***

**Timothy Clark:** A telephone call was the first thing. I was not thinking of it at all, if I am honest with you. But essentially an executive search consultant introduced me to the University, sent me some materials. And I am a management scholar, it is a management-focused University although it does social sciences and information systems. But the fact that it was called Singapore Management University, and I have run a business school, and I am very proud of the fact that I am a management academic—that was the initial sort of glue in a sense. And then I learned more about the strategy and the ambition of the university and got a deeper sense of its values. And so those things kind of hardened the glue.

**Pat Meyer:** You mentioned these opportunities. Did you see any risks?

**Timothy Clark:** In terms of coming here? Certainly. Well I suppose there is a number of risks. I mean one is in terms of... There are personal risks, professional risks, as well as perhaps family risks. So, if I take the latter, it is a big move for my family. But as it happened, my son is at university, and so he is starting his career journey. My daughter has finished her A-levels and is currently awaiting her results, and we will learn whether she got into the university of her choice in the next couple of weeks. So, my children in a sense are going through a transitional phase, and their location and their friendship groups and their networks will very much be away from home although they want to use home as a base. So, in speaking to them their view was well, whether the base was in England or whether the base was in Singapore, it didn't really matter to them. And in some respects, Singapore was interesting because culturally it was a place that they would like to know more about. They were interested in traveling to

Thailand and Australia, and my daughter wanted to go to Bali and so forth. So, from their point of view, geographically, it is a springboard to bigger adventures.

In terms of my professional life, it seemed to me that the choices are do you run a wide, a broad university or do you run a more focused university? And my feeling was that I understand my discipline very well, I have got a lot of experience running a faculty that was a very wide range of disciplines, but I found it quite difficult to get traction across all the disciplines. I understood the cultures well, but trying to get change and trying to get a geography department to change in a particular way, trying to get an anthropology department to change, and then a politics department and a business school and so forth. They all work at different speeds and in different ways, and whilst that is very interesting, it can get quite frustrating after a time because you are trying to nudge so many boulders up hills.

So, the focused nature of the university, I felt I could make an impact because I am a management scholar, I understand the broad range of disciplines. Although I haven't run a computer science department or an information systems department but had some familiarity with that. So, for me being able to make a contribution in quite a focused way is a big attraction in a discipline that I understand well. Plus, it seemed to me that because of the focus of the University, the opportunity to enable it to reach its potential was that much higher than in a broader range university. So those were the sorts of the positive sides. The one risk, I suppose is that I have thought about but I have discarded, is do you give up the opportunity to run a British university by making a choice like this? I may have, but I am quite prepared to give up that opportunity because I think this is a more exciting role.

**Pat Meyer:** Many people have heard about a university provost but not everybody is sure about what a provost does. Tell us a little bit in your words about your role and maybe some common misconceptions or misunderstandings.

**Timothy Clark:** Right. Well as an academic, I might have greater familiarity with the sort of concept than others, and so you might have to prompt me in terms of what people might misunderstand. But ultimately, I suppose, you are the chief academic officer of the University. I mean the president is the chief executive in the sense of the University, and the president's role is focused inwards and outwards but very much on outward facing—a greater balance towards the outward facing rather than inward facing. The provost essentially runs the academic core of the University, that is the schools and the programs and the faculty and the staff who contribute to those. So their role is looking at the quality of teaching, for example, and the nature of the courses that we offer, reviewing curricula, as well as thinking about the interface between teaching and research, and developing research in schools, looking at faculty development and tenure and promotion, as well as staff development in terms of support staff. So, it is the full range. What you are trying to do is to optimize all of that to create a University that has the highest quality possible of teaching and research.

**Pat Meyer:** As a newcomer to SMU, were there any surprises?

***Selected for Oral History website: Topic: Concepts & Value***

**Timothy Clark:** One of the attractions to me, as I said earlier, was that I felt the values were commensurate. Although Durham is different from SMU, values wise I felt there was a really strong connection, and in some respects, the things that I value were slightly greater emphasized here than they were at my previous institution. So, the values side of things hasn't surprised me because, in effect, I think it's been reinforced in the last four months or so.

What surprised me? I suppose two things have surprised me. One thing is the Ministry of Education, there is a sense of a national project, that SMU is part of the national project. Again, for me, that was a big attraction. I think what surprised me is the real sense of connectedness between the University and a range of Singapore stakeholders, both government and industry, and a real sense of ambition for the University and a wish to support us and help us in a way that I have not experienced before. A real warmth to the University and a real willingness to help and have conversations, and to understand us and to even change policy or change the way that they are interfacing with us to help us. So that has been a real kind of novel experience for me in that I have experienced an environment in which government and industry has tended to be quite distanced from universities, and you had to work very, very hard to get their attention. But here that has not been a problem.

I suppose the other issue that surprised me is that the University has developed around its undergraduate programs and has a very, very strong undergraduate offering, has been developing a postgraduate offer, but actually the two are not as connected as I thought they would be. Essentially, the University operates the postgraduate quite separately to the undergraduate. Now there are reasons for that in relation to government funding. But I think in terms of curriculum, in terms of term structure, in terms of course unit structure, in terms of student experience, there are actually crossovers that we need to enhance. And so that surprised me, that the University is almost run as two universities, one for undergraduates and one for postgraduates. It has not been as integrated as perhaps I have experienced in other universities, not simply those that I've worked in but many universities that I have visited.

**Pat Meyer:** You have lived in different countries, you have done research on management in different cultures, you are interested in how people in organisations communicate and learn. How do you bring that to your role here?

**Timothy Clark:** So that is interesting. Okay, so I think, and again, it is one of those things that only becomes apparent to you either when it is revealed by somebody or you hit sort of juxtaposing viewpoints. But I think one of the things I have learned is that I am quite good at analysing organizations, and I am quite good at doing a SWOT analysis and picking up very quickly on strengths and weaknesses and cultural nuances and so forth. Quite good at analysing people as well, and understanding what the agendas are in terms of what the unspoken part of a conversation. So, I think my research around communication has certainly helped me look at the micro aspects of communication, to understand both the stated as well as the unstated.

I think my OB training—organizational behaviour training—has helped that organizational analytical aspect. I think the communication has helped in terms of both being able to manage conversations in a particular way but also understand how to prompt and not prompt, and when to ask the question and when not to ask the question, and how a conversation flows.

And the other thing I was reflecting on the other day—because I read my first commencement speech and delivered it—is I do research on public speaking, and I thought well I do it, I had better do it well, too. So, I am very conscious that I have to put the things that I research into practice, although the context in which I research is very different from giving a commencement speech. So, the kind of degree to which you can kind of give a sort of international intonational shifts and emotion into a commencement speech vary from the context in which I study. So, I think those are, that is how my research translates perhaps into my practice. I am sure there are other ways too.

**Pat Meyer:** Can you tell us about how you are getting to know the SMU community and opportunities to meet students?

**Timothy Clark:** So, the community at large, I would say predominantly through meeting people both in formal and informal ways. In terms of students, I have met with the Student Association representatives on several occasions and with the president of the Student Association, created a sort of structured interaction going forward so that there are regular meetings with me, at points in the year that matter for them in terms of their activities. I have been attending a large number of student activities in terms of cultural activities and arts activities, and I have been really enjoying them. I attended the choral concert and the Eurhythmix as well as I attended freshman orientation, the final evening where they give presentations and performances, as well as popping in to see how things are going, both informally and formally. So, in terms of the students, also been to Prinsep Street and spoken to students and the residents there and visited, and really tried to understand what they are doing and understand their programme. I have been trying to immerse myself as much as my time allows in student life. And when we have the start of term in a few weeks, again, I will be walking around both, formally and informally, to try and meet as many students as I can, attending induction events both as a speaker but also just as an attendee to get to know people.

In terms of faculty and staff, again it has very much been formal—a whole range of numerous formal meetings—and then as much informal activities as I can. I have been attending some evening staff events. I don't know anything about sake, so I attended a sake-tasting evening for example, trying just to meet different staff groups. Walking from my office to where we are having our discussion now, involves going through the concourse. And I literally just walk into offices and say, "How are things going? How are you doing?", introduce myself. Sometimes they are a bit shocked, but I literally just say, "How is your day? What are you doing? What sort of things do you do?" just to build a sense of what goes on in the Wellness Centre, what goes on in ODOS, in student life, and so forth in the Student Hub, just really to try and get a sense of the temperature of what is going on, but also get a more detailed sense of well, who are the key people who are contributing to our educational experience and the life of our students.

**Pat Meyer:** Getting to know the neighbourhood?

**Timothy Clark:** As much as possible, yes. And then more broadly, of course, there are numerous other stakeholders in the University in terms of industry and government. And again, that is attending a whole range of functions and activities, again both formal and informal, to try and introduce myself and learn who all these influencers are.

**Pat Meyer:** SMU will soon be entering its third decade. What do you see is the challenges and the advantages of it being a relatively young institution?

**Timothy Clark:** I previously worked for a university that claimed to be the third oldest in England, England, not the UK, because there were a number of Scottish universities that were older. It was established in 1832. Now I say that because when I was running my faculty, I was very conscious that I was dealing with years and years of culture that had built up over the intervening hundred and fifty plus years, and that the decisions that were made early in the first twenty, thirty years of the university probably were still resonating a hundred and fifty plus years later. And that changing culture that is that deep-seated is not easy. Interesting, but not easy. And so one of the real positives it seems to me about being a nineteen year old university soon to be twenty, is that there is a tremendous opportunity for the leadership team of the University in the first twenty or thirty years to build culture and practices that will outlive us all but benefit future generations of leaders and students and faculty and staff. And so, I am very conscious that the decisions we make now are going to impact on the leadership team and the students and staff population in thirty years time. However, the important thing is to get it right. For me, being young means that you can create a culture and a university that will have longevity, but do it in the right way, and perhaps learn from some of the models and lessons of other universities. So that is a real advantage.

Clearly, being young, I suppose the key issue that gets mentioned to me most is that we are perhaps not as well-known as some of the other universities—NUS and NTU in Singapore—and so we are not as well ranked in the world rankings, particularly the QS ranking, we are 477th at the moment. It does take a long time for your reputation and awareness of the University to grow, and it is not going to happen in the next five years, possibly might start 10 years or so. But fundamentally, one of the issues unfortunately is that higher education, particularly those programs that depend upon international students, who

are very driven by world ranking tables, and currently we are not high up in those rankings. We perform phenomenally well in terms of our disciplinary rankings and so we need to stress those. We do well in terms of the young university rankings, and we do well in terms of the specialist university rankings. But people tend to pay more attention I am afraid to headline rankings. So, the tremendous advantage is the ability to build and shape something for many years to come. I think the key disadvantage that I have encountered in my last four months or the thing that most gets mentioned to me is this issue of our broader reputation and awareness.

**Pat Meyer:** Building on that, what do you see as SMU's strengths and what areas would you like to strengthen?



**Timothy Clark:** The second one is an interesting question because I think it gets to the heart of what is the disciplinary footprint of the university. So I will return to that in a minute.

***Selected for Oral History website: Topic: Challenges & Future***

Clearly the University was established to be a focused University around a small range of social science disciplines. The immediate strength of the University is the strength of those disciplines. And my role and the role of the President and the role of the leadership team across the University is to make those the strongest they can be. Fundamentally, that reputation issue that I just referred to is addressed through creating strong, highly-regarded, reputable disciplines and recruiting high-quality students who become our alumni and ambassadors for the University. So long as we keep making the right decisions, in terms of faculty hires and in terms of students and producing the quality that we are producing at the moment, both in terms of research and teaching outcomes, the University's reputation will pick up. And I think the big advantage is that are our size and the juxtaposition and interrelationship of those disciplines means that we can create mixes and experiences for both students and faculty that other universities can't. We can combine courses and modules and allow students to flow across our schools in a much more flexible way than other universities.

The big questions in society are not going to be answered by single disciplines. They are going to be answered by disciplines coming together and either doing interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary work. Given the size of the University, and as I said the strong interrelationship between the disciplines we have, that really gives us a competitive advantage when it comes to answering some big questions in society, and having the impact that we want to on society. So we talk about making meaningful impact. I think our size and ability to flex our multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity really enables us to have a deeper level of impact.

In terms of the shape of the University going forward, that is something that I am actively thinking about. Before I came for my interview, I gave that some thought, and it seemed to me that social science as a whole is taking a quantitative turn—it is moving from qualitative to quantitative—and that to be a high-performing research academic, you have got to be a highly skilled quantitative researcher. The one area where I felt we might consider developing and could connect a number of disciplines is maths and particular kinds of math, particularly statistics. It is an area where we could perhaps think about developing in the Social Science School, and that might then act as a bridge into Information Systems and into parts of the Business School. Economics. So again, having advanced mathematics in the University would be really, I think, a good thing.

So just going back to my previous role when I worked at Durham, I think where we were able to really leverage, that is we had physics and we had a Maths Department but we had a Physics department and essentially it was the Physics and the Maths department in combination that were really driving the quantitative skills base of the university. And I was leveraging that into my faculty, essentially mathematical innovations, we were starting to leverage into Geography, into Economics, and Finance. So we have got to find a way, given that we do not have physics, of building

that quantitative capability in the University using the resources and the disciplinary base that we have.

**Pat Meyer:** You are describing areas that you see going forward. In these four months and the rest of the year, what are some of your initial priorities as provost?

***Selected for Oral History website: Topic: Teaching & Curriculum***

**Timothy Clark:** When I came for an interview, that experience reinforced something that I had hoped would be here, which is that the University thinks deeply about its curriculum. And so I inherited a Blue Ribbon Commission on Undergraduate Studies and was very impressed by the level of thinking and the way in which it had connected with key pedagogic developments around the world and brought that together into a coherent package, and then developed a curriculum that was based on three pillars—the disciplinary curriculum, the core curriculum and the co-curriculum. And Durham professed to have a holistic approach to Education and essentially the way that was delivered was to have a disciplinary curriculum essentially and nothing else. And then what we called the wider student experience, which was located in colleges, but we did not design the interface elements. We left the two in parallel and then students designed and connected the two themselves. There was not any kind of purposeful design behind it. What I really liked at SMU was this sense of purposeful design.

So I said earlier that the University—two universities in terms of undergraduate and postgraduate—so I felt that what we needed to do was an equivalent deep dive and deep thinking in relation to postgraduate education because the University, even though it is only 19 years old, has a fairly mature undergraduate offer, although it is been significantly enhanced through the BRC-UG, and we needed to do the same for postgraduate. We need to make a step change essentially, the same step change that we made to our undergraduate curriculum, we needed to create that step change for postgraduate education. And as I said the thing that surprised me and has surprised me is just how fragmented the postgraduate part of the University is, and how little integration there is at present.

The second priority was not something that I had planned to do but as a sense hit me which was - I conducted a review of student discipline. That has become quite a major focus for me in the last four months and indeed has just been signed off earlier this week. There was a particular incident at NUS that generated a national debate about how universities approached disciplining students and sanctioning student behaviour, particularly around cases of sexual misconduct. I already had identified that we needed to review our student discipline code because when the University was established essentially, we have absorbed the University of Pennsylvania codes and procedures. And those codes in a sense reflect a particular time. We did not have mobile phones in those days. Plagiarism and the type of plagiarism and how people can plagiarize, differs now. So, we needed to update our code regardless. That particular instance at NUS forced us to quicken the pace of our review, and so that has been a major focus for me.

***Selected for Oral History website: Topic: Campus: Prinsep Street going forward***

And then the third area is that I mentioned Prinsep Street earlier and that I have been to Prinsep Street. I came from a university that had a collegiate system and essentially students lived in colleges, and sport, music and art was located in colleges. And the disciplinary studies were located in schools and departments. And we had started an experiment a year or so ago when we refurbished Prinsep Street—this is experience with SMU—that we decided that we would create a residential living and learning community. And I think a question for the University—given where it is in its development—is to what extent do we want to have a residential experience in the University? We are a city centre-based University. There is an argument that students do not want to live in a University residence because of our location; they could just as easily live at home. But on the other hand, the residential living and learning concept, the possibilities of that and what I have seen in my previous university and how that can really enhance and broaden the development of the student, it seems to me that we need to give thought to whether or not we expand what we are doing at Prinsep Street beyond Prinsep Street. There is the possibility that the University could have a second residence, and so I am conducting a review to think through whether the University expands its residential offer, and if it does, how we need to strengthen and develop the current concept that we call the residential living and learning community. So those have been three of the big things. There have been a few other things as well.

**Pat Meyer:** Thank you. I am going to ask you how you go about developing—this is a two-part question—how you go about developing the faculty and leadership team to take SMU forward? And in conjunction with that, I also want to ask you if your own sense of leadership has changed as you have had these various roles and changes with your career?

***Selected for Oral History website: Topic: Faculty***

**Timothy Clark:** My observation is, and it is interesting you asked that question today because, I have actually had two opportunities to talk through leadership development today. So, it has been a bit of a theme today. My feeling is that we are not developing the leadership pipeline as strongly as we need to, and that when you do systemic succession planning across the University, you start to see some gaps. So, I am conscious that we are not really developing our leadership, the cadres of leadership that we need, say at the school level, tier one, tier two, and so forth. So, one of the things I am looking into at the moment is how we might develop a leadership development program for different kinds of faculty and staff, so that we start to develop a pipeline. And what that would involve is maybe identifying 30 or so people across the University—not guaranteeing them a leadership role but saying that we think you have leadership potential—and then putting them through a common program over time that would get them ready for a leadership role were one to open up. So, the question I ask myself is if someone became ill or a particular incident occurred, who is the person that we could insert into that role? In some cases, there is a ready-made successor, but in other cases, there is no clear successor. But regardless, we have a very narrow pool of people that we can put into those roles, and we need to expand that. We need to diversify. So, I am very conscious that a lot of people who could step up to roles are men, and it seems to me that what we—and I am very committed to

this—that what we want to do is develop a much more diverse, both from gender and race point of view, leadership structure in the University. That means identifying and developing a cadre of people who are diverse and can take on roles and then giving them opportunities to rehearse and enact that leadership going forward.

So, you asked how my leadership style has changed?

**Pat Meyer:** If it has?

**Timothy Clark:** I suppose as part of the selection process, you reflect on your own leadership style, and I am not sure how to describe that if I am honest with you. I would say that in terms of this role, the key thing when you come into an institution, I suppose, the key questions I ask certainly are what is the culture of leadership and how might I want to shift that a bit? Secondly, what is the pace of decision making and how do decisions get made? Because that tells you a lot about leadership. It is different from when I was at Durham. and I am still adjusting to those differences. If you ask my colleagues at Durham about my leadership style, they would probably say that I was... the first thing they would say to you was that I am calm. I used to hate them saying that, but the first thing they would say. I didn't like it because what I wanted them to say I was strategic, but anyway, they said I was calm. But they meant it very, very positively in the sense that at times, the university was having a nervous breakdown, and essentially what used to happen was everything would funnel to me. And then I would have to calm everybody down and say, "Right, let's just stop, we're going to think about this, let's not panic" and so forth.

And so, the second thing is that I am consultative, and I think that is where my experience of Durham and SMU is slightly different. I mean I am genuinely consultative. I don't mind being challenged. I don't mind people speaking up. I don't mind people having different ideas to me. In fact, I am delighted if they do. But I have realized that being provost, there is a different dynamic in relation to power distance to my previous role, and SMU is also in a different power distance culture to my previous role, and so consultation has to operate slightly differently in that context. In my previous role I came up from the bottom, and so I knew a lot. In this role, I have been parachuted into the top. And so, you have not built those trusting relationships where people feel they can speak up, and so the power distance relationship is slightly different than perhaps it was in my previous role in that I had been with a lot of those people for a period of time in different roles, and they had come to trust me in those different roles and so forth.

So, I realized that what I have got to do is build swift trust. I suppose I primarily do that, I hope, by encouraging people at every meeting I attend, to contribute and to say something and to recognize that I don't know it all, and I always say a good university is built on active debate. Because we have got clever people, immensely intelligent people who could contribute in wonderful ways, and what we have got to do is harness them and empower them, and that is my key role to really give people the self-confidence and empower them to speak up so that we identify the best ideas. And then to basically back those ideas, and I am not going to have all the best ideas, but what I have got to do is create the context and empower people. And as I said, I think the key difference is the power distance dynamic is different for me because I have

come in straight at the top, rather than work my way from being a lecturer to the top which is what I did when I was at Durham.

**Pat Meyer:** I want to look ahead more broadly at tertiary education. Do you see the model for tertiary education changing, and if so, how do you think SMU should respond?

**Timothy Clark:** That is a big question. How to provide a succinct answer? I have come from a very successful and leading world—in terms of world and higher education context—that has probably started to realize that the nature of higher education is shifting in terms of what is happening in Asia, and how that is impacting on Europe and North America. It seems to me that going forward, SMU as well as other universities in Singapore are world-class, that countries that once exported talent to other university systems are going to gradually not export that talent or export it a lot less. A critical issue in terms of the shift in tertiary education is going to be some of the student mobility dynamics going forward. I am pretty sure for instance that you will see fewer students going from Asia to Europe and North America as those local systems start to develop. As I say, already in China, Hong Kong, Australia, Singapore, they each have truly world-class universities that can compete with the best elsewhere. We will start to retain some of that great talent that used to go abroad.

***Selected for Oral History website: Topic: Challenges & Future***

The other issue I will focus on is how student demands will change because students are more demanding, and so I think that our holistic and well-rounded approach to our education clearly provides a broader experience for the students. But I think at the same time, because it is not narrowly focused on the discipline, and because we have the expectation around internships and global experiences and volunteering and we are trying to develop that broader person, I think we are challenging our students—the heart of education it seems to me. When I was at Durham, we used to say to students at graduation and commencement, we used to say, “I hope you have had a challenging time.” And then we say what we mean by that is we hope that we have really pushed you, and we hope we have developed you intellectually, and we hope that we have developed those skills that we want you to develop. It seems to me that that so long as we get that challenge right, then we will address the level of student expectations.

But I think in terms of digital learning and the way that pedagogy will need to change, certainly we will have to adjust the way that we teach. We will have to move into blended, we will have to move into digital, we will have to move into online. We will have to upskill the faculty and support the faculty in terms of that shift. Our students will always be one step ahead of us because of the generational issue and so forth. But I think the two changes that I see perhaps impacting on SMU: one—greater presence and success of our education in this part of the world and its ability to compete with the traditional dominant countries. And secondly, the move to digital education, and how we will have to adjust our pedagogy and teaching techniques accordingly.

**Pat Meyer:** Two last questions. What's the best thing about your job?

**Timothy Clark:** It is a difficult thing to say. The best thing is just being enormously proud, to be frank, being enormously proud of the University, and just being able to see every day, wonderful work and celebrate it. So, getting news on grant successes, student successes, student achievement, faculty achievement, staff achievement, and seeing how committed people are to the University. Being part of somewhere that people really care about and want to be successful, that is what is wonderful. So I always love coming in in the morning because, I suppose, I was going to say I have a wonderful view and I can see the University, and I look at the University every morning and just think how enormously proud of it I am.

**Pat Meyer:** You said that students would be starting term in a couple weeks' time. Any advice for incoming students and returning students?

*Selected for Oral History website: Topic: Advice for Students*

**Timothy Clark:** I suppose my key advice is don't waste your time here, that there are lots and lots of opportunities. And yes, you want to achieve everything you can in your studies, and we want you to excel in your studies and achieve the highest grade degree you can. But at the same time, as a University, we offer a broader education as I said, that more holistic approach to education, and whilst I appreciate every student needs to achieve an appropriate balance for them, I would very much hope that they explore the co-curricular side of the education at SMU and excel in that as well as excelling in their academic studies. So, I would encourage them whether they are a new student coming to the University or they are senior student to always think about that balance and not to get too over balanced on one or the other.

**Pat Meyer:** Anything else you would like to add?

**Timothy Clark:** I'm fine, thanks.

**Pat Meyer:** Thank you very much.

**Timothy Clark:** Okay.

#### Acronyms

BRC-UG	Blue Ribbon Commission for Undergraduate Education
NCH	National Children's Home
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
OB	Organizational Behavior
ODOS	Office of Dean of Students
QS	Quacquarelli Symonds World University Rankings
SIT	Singapore Institute of Technology
UK	United Kingdom