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Oral History Interview with Lily Kong

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Pat Meyer: Today is Friday, 2nd of November 2018 and this interview is taking place in SMU's recording studio in the Li Ka Shing Library and it is part of the university's oral history project. I'm Pat Meyer. Today I'll be speaking with Professor Lily Kong, who is provost of Singapore Management University and also Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences.

Two months from now, you will become the fifth president of SMU. And today, we would like to get your perspectives on your journey to date and on what lies ahead. But first, I'd like to start by stepping back to your university days and just asking you to tell us a little bit about that time, your particular field of study, and just briefly about your career at NUS.

Lily Kong: Very happy to do that. But just before that, I want to say how much it is a privilege to be able to take on the mantle as fifth president, and it is such an honour, and with it comes a tremendous responsibility that I am very conscious of but excited about.

I think that I will take with me to the presidency a lot of who I am, and that is shaped by the journey that I have walked through the years. Just reflecting on my undergraduate days, it is not difficult to think of the quite different environment that I was in. I was in an environment in a very large university with … very many more students, even at that point in time. I was in an environment where technology was not as advanced as it is today.

One practice that I remember vividly is how we would run from door to door signing up for tutorials with tutors who were scattered across three different departments. And when I reflect now on what our students have access to by way of technology, I would say that technology has improved the lives of students in many ways, and we should harness technology to improve student experience. But I am also very conscious that technology should not replace human interaction, and that has been a very key part of what I am trying to do as provost in thinking through pedagogical issues. More about that later.

Pat Meyer: Just tell us briefly about your career at NUS.

OH Topic: President – Career in Singapore prior to joining SMU

Lily Kong: When I was an undergraduate in my final year, the head of department said to me, "Would you be interested to be an academic?" and I had not really thought about that. I was always interested in teaching, I was very interested in education as a line of work. And my mother tells me that when I was three, I lined the dolls up against the wall and taught all the dolls. I have always wanted to teach, and I was headed directly for that. But my head of department said, "Well, you know, as an academic, you get to do that, but you also get to do more. And you have demonstrated an ability with research even as an undergraduate, and wouldn't you want to be an academic where you could balance both of

those things?" And I thought, well how interesting is that? I get to teach, and I get to do the research that I have come to quite enjoy.

The National University of Singapore was good enough to give me a scholarship that took me to London for my PhD. And those were three very memorable years. I learned a great deal about what it meant to live independently. I learned a great deal about what it meant to navigate different cultural contexts with students from all over the world. I learned what it meant to develop relationships with people from scratch, and I think it was quite instrumental in shaping my approach to education and people in general.

So, I went away and I came back. I had a bond to serve and that was six years of it. I thoroughly enjoyed the six years, but even during that period and after, I would sometimes get offers from other universities to say, "Would you come?" And I remember two offers from the UK, and one from Australia and one from the US, and it was always family that kept me here. It was always family that I wanted to be with. The role of being an academic in a university means that you nevertheless get to travel for conferences, you nevertheless get to collaborate with people across boundaries, and go on fellowships for extended periods to other universities. And so the tremendous experience I had overseas as a student was further augmented through the international collaborations and international visits.

So, I stayed on at NUS as a faculty member despite the overseas offers of faculty positions, and in my third year back from London with a PhD, the then dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences called me up one day and I thought, "What did I do now?" And he said, "Would you like to be sub dean?", as we were then called, assistant deans, in effect. The assistant deans at that point in time were all faculty members unlike the SMU context where they are professional administrative staff. And I took that on thinking, oh yeah, sure, I have got time on my hands, I can take on something more. And I did a lot of things that today in the context of NUS would be done by high-level admin staff—organizing open days and producing the faculty newsletter and so forth.

A couple of years after that, I had another call from the then dean who said, "Would you like to be vice dean?", and that is associate dean equivalent. And I thought, well, all right, we'll give it a try. And I did that for a short period, and the then vice-chancellor called me and said, "would you like to be dean?", and I thought, oh, this is getting serious. I took that on at a young age of 35. It was not easy. I had senior colleagues with many years of experience in their 50s, even 60s. And they would say to me, "Well, you know, I'm used to working with people with 35 years of experience, not 35 years of age." So, I sort of took that, and I said, that is all right, I will show them that it is not the biological age that matters. Was there something about the gender? Maybe, because these were senior male professors. And it was not entirely easy at the beginning because the university at that point in time was deeply into change. It was a teaching university that was shifting to become a research-intensive university.

It was a point in time when there was a new president, the position had morphed from vice chancellorship of the British tradition to presidency of the North American tradition. The then president was a Singaporean who had returned after decades in the US and used to a very different environment and ambitions. And he was ambitious for the university, rightly so, and it was about steering change of a very large, very established, very historical university. And I was dean right then at that point in time. And it meant that I had to learn about change management. And it meant that, while I embraced the ambitions of the university, the new university in that sense, I also had to be mindful that colleagues had different expectations of them in the past and so forth—a familiar story about change management. And so I learned how to hopefully, successfully, straddle a path between pushing for ambitious goals while being empathetic to individual needs.

I was dean for three years and a bit, and then the president called me again and said, "Would you like to join the Provost's Office?" And at that point in time—a little confession—as dean at that particular point in time, I had a lot of people management to do. There were the intellectual things to do about devising curriculum and so forth, and that was the fun and easy part in a certain sense because it was

an intellectual exercise. But effecting that change was about working with people and bringing people along with you and a lot of hand-holding, a lot of cajoling, a lot of persuasion, and it was tiring. And the role in the Provost's Office, which was much more policy-oriented, was a welcomed one because I wanted a rest from the daily engagement with people and so forth. Even while I enjoyed and relished that, and saw the importance of such engagement, it was tiring. So I switched then to a much more policy role.

My first role as vice provost was vice provost for education. And I looked after everything from undergraduate to postgraduate education which included masters and PhD programs, and I thoroughly enjoyed that. I learned so much. I learned so much because I chaired a committee that looked at all curricular proposals from across a comprehensive university. I learned about engineering and dentistry and medicine and architecture and everything else. I had a group of people in the curriculum committee who were experts in their own domains and forged a really nice partnership with the committee members until today, and this would be about 13, 14 years later. The group would still say, come, let's go together for lunch. I reminisce about the days when we talked about curriculum centering on better dental care or building bridges or whatever it was. So that was really nice.

Then I was invited to concurrently head up a research institute. When I was dean, I had convinced the president to put in money to set up an Asia Research Institute. I had thought, how can we in Singapore not be the voice for understanding Asia from Asian perspectives, whether it is by Asians or from an Asia perch as such? And he was good enough to put in quite a bit of money for that. And so, at that point in time, I took on the directorship while concurrently holding a vice provost role. That was fun as well. There were difficulties of all kinds which I won't go into, but the ability to shape a research agenda was tremendous.

I then was asked whether I would take on a different portfolio from the education one and the research one, and that new portfolio was to do with global relations. It was about the university looking outward, establishing its relationships, collaborations and so forth. And it came at a good point again because I had spent some years doing the two pieces of work, and I have realized now that every three or four years, I was changing portfolio in NUS, and even though I have been with NUS for 24, 25 years, it felt like I was changing jobs more frequently than that. I went and I did the global relations role which was amazing. I met so many wonderful people from different universities around the world, and made good friends. I went to many meetings of presidents and vice chancellors accompanying my president. I learned what it meant to think about a university's future, chart the paths, forge collaborations.

The biggest project that I did in that capacity was to work with my then president to tie up with Yale in establishing Yale-NUS College. And that again taught me so much about how to see things from a different cultural perspective, not to take what we know for granted, verbalizing things that are tacit knowledge, navigating different cultures, politics, negotiating with a partner institution, negotiating with the Ministry of Education, looking at legal documents, editing every last word, looking at financial spreadsheets, hiring people. That entire journey was a five-year journey even though the work with Yale in particular was for about three years, because the two years prior to Yale coming into the picture, we were studying the feasibility of setting up a liberal arts college in Singapore and the best model for that. We were studying liberal arts colleges in the US, and we were actually in conversation with the Claremont Consortium as well. So I learnt to deal with disappointment when negotiations don't go the way you hope. I learned that getting on the exercise machine was really important at the end of a day, to keep healthy and alert. And just observing an amazing president like Rick Levin at Yale and his vice-president, Linda Lorimer, taught me a great deal, and I think those kinds of relationships and experiences stay with you forever.

After I finished with that, I was asked whether I would do another portfolio at NUS, back in the mothership, so to speak, not the Yale-NUS, but back in the mothership. And this was back to being vice provost, but this time with the academic personnel portfolio, which basically dealt with all faculty

matters. I was really thrown into all the pleasures but also pressures of whether you tenure someone or you don't, and the aftermath when somebody is not successfully tenured. I looked into policies to improve the lives of faculty members. At that point in time, if a female faculty member went on maternity leave, it wasn't a matter of course that they would get the tenure extension. I wrote in policies to make all of that possible. Working with many colleagues and in consultation across the university, I'd like to think that I also contributed to the lot of the education-track colleagues, who always felt a little bit—how shall I put it? —a little bit tentative about what their role was, whether it was truly valued as opposed to the tenure-track and so forth. And with the blessings of my provost and president, put in place policies that helped to put them where they rightfully deserved to be, which is respected members of a community, because of their ability to communicate with and educate our students really well, that research was not the be-all and end-all in a university.

And that was about the time that a search firm came knocking at my door, and they said, "You know, there is a position at SMU that might use your experience," and I thought, oh, but I haven't finished my work at NUS. I still have many other policies that I want to try and introduce and so forth." And they said, "Come, come, just have a chat." So I had a chat with them, and then I said, "No, but I haven't finished my work," and then they said, "No, no, why don't you talk to Arnoud?" So I ran along to Raffles City or Fairmont or wherever it was, and we had a coffee and I said, "I haven't quite finished my work," and he said, "I understand, but think about it, we'll chat again." And we went again to that same coffee lounge in Fairmont hotel, and he said "You know, these are the sorts of things we want to do at SMU. Your entire portfolio shows that you could do all of this. Think about it." And I went away, and I thought, oh, this is tough. This is really attractive because if you look at what I've done over the years, I've sort of always been involved in new developmental projects, and this was one of them, except it's a whole university. Oh my, isn't that exciting? And then, of course, truth be told, there are all the personal ties, the friendship ties that you've cultivated over 25 years. It is my alma mater. I've always imagined myself eventually retiring from my office in the Geography Department, right at the corner with a wonderful tree right in front as I look out of the window. I thought this was so difficult. And Arnoud said, why don't you speak to a couple of our trustees? So, bit by bit, he reeled me in, and I must say he did a really good job of it, and that's what happened. I went to speak with Paul Beh, and I spoke with Timothy Chia, and I remember it was around Christmas time. As it turned out, those conversations were much more about persuading me to take on the job, than in assessing me. And that was very flattering, if nothing else. I was very grateful for the trust, having just met me over coffee, for them to sort of try and persuade me to take on the job. It was something that I should not take lightly, I thought to myself. I spoke with my family, and I decided that I would try. I would take the step and move ahead.

And that was when I was told, come and meet with the faculty senate exco, come and meet with the deans and so forth. And I felt that if I were to do that, the news would be out that I was going to come to SMU or contemplate it. And I thought it only fair that I spoke to my president and provost back at NUS, and that is what I did. I went to them, and I said, this is what has happened. I want to be very transparent even though, you know, it wasn't a done deal at SMU. I might come across terribly and the deans and the vice provosts at SMU might revolt and say, "No, don't take her", or maybe things will work out and I might actually leave NUS. And I remember I was quite close to tears when I was talking to them because, "Oh, how can I leave NUS?"

And so started the journey where they talked to me about whether I should go, and, there were two things that were said to me that were countervailing, but which I took to heart. One was a comment that, "As your provost, I must do everything I can to retain you at NUS, but as your friend, I think you should take this challenge up because I think your potential is above being a vice provost." And I thought okay, it is very kind of you to say so, I will take that on board. I had another piece of advice which was, "As your friend, I think you have the potential to do more but as your president I want you to stay. And even if you're walking down the aisle to get married to someone, you can still turn around. Don't feel obliged

because you've had all these conversations with SMU." It was true that I had gone quite far in my conversations with SMU, that I felt it was very bad form, first of all, for me to take SMU quite so far and then to back off. But it wasn't just obligation which was the point of my then president's message to me: "Don't do it out of obligation. Do it because there's a difference you want to make."

And at the end of the day. I thought, I will try. I think there are things I would like to do, ideas that I would like to bring to a new institution, and I will try. And so I took my life in my hands and crossed the road. So then I ended up in SMU and have learned a lot in that process as well. It has been humbling and gratifying all at the same time.

I am just going to pause and see if you have a question that you'd like to interject with. I talked too much. Okay…

Pat Meyer: Today…

Lily Kong: Okay…

Pat Meyer: If we haven't finished all the questions, we already have…

Lily Kong: We'll set up another time. Yes, okay.

Pat Meyer: Okay. Before discussing more specifics about your role, can you just describe, what is a university provost?

Lily Kong: When I took on the role as provost, I had friends who said, "What is that?" and I told them, "Oh, that's chief police officer." They said "What?" and I said "Look in the dictionary. That's what it says". But the truth of the matter, the provost is the chief academic officer, and basically the chief academic officer deals with everything to do with academic programs—in many places, research programs as well, although in some universities the research function could be carved out into a separate role, say deputy president—but everything internal to do with academics, research, students, faculty, it is the internal core of the university. That is not to say that things like HR and Finance, etc, are not core, but they are enabling the primary function of the university which is delivering the academic and research programmes.

Pat Meyer: And now I would like to look at your priorities as provost starting with undergraduate education, and one of the things you did was lead a Blue Ribbon Commission to make recommendations on SMU's undergraduate education. Can you tell us what drove the establishment of that commission?

OH Topic: Teaching & Curriculum – Blue Ribbon Commission for Undergraduate Education

Lily Kong: There were various factors that led me to establish that commission. One was that in terms of the undergraduate curriculum, the University had been pioneering at the time of its establishment in 2000, it had introduced a broad-based educational system not unlike the US, in contrast to the British-based deep major that was delivered in the other two major universities at that point in time. Although changes had been made along the way, the basic structure and the basic philosophy had remained, and I thought, as we approach our third decade, it is very timely for us to take a really hard look, especially at this time when the world is undergoing such change. That is not to say change hasn't happened in the past, but the pace of change, the nature and direction of change may be somewhat different at this point in time, and so that was one.

Secondly, I was very conscious that SMU had a lot to offer in the core curricular space that was as much part of the education of our students as the disciplinary curriculum, but we had not fully realized the potential of that, I thought. And I wanted to do something about that. I also wanted us to think very hard about what we are trying to achieve—what are the outcomes, the learning outcomes for our graduates— and be driven with the end in sight, so to speak. So, whether it is the curriculum, the pedagogy, the co-curriculum, the core curriculum, I wanted all of it to speak to the graduate learning outcomes. And I did

not start with a preconception that we were not doing it and therefore needed a commission to look into how to do it. I started with the premise that there were probably some things we were doing that were speaking to certain outcomes, there were probably some things that we were not doing that could speak to the learning outcomes, and there were probably some things that we were doing just because we had been doing them for years and had not really thought about what the desired outcomes were.

I got together a group of people from across the six schools, and I am so delighted with the choice of colleagues that came on board because they were all wonderful contributors. More than the immediate group of about 20, there were work groups, that whole Commission was divided up into five or six work groups, and they co-opted both faculty and staff into each of the work groups. So all in, the engagement involved about 50 to 60 people in the thinking and discussion and so forth. Of course, subsequently, we engaged a whole lot more stakeholders, but this was roughly the group that I think has contributed significantly to the outcomes of the Blue Ribbon Commission. We started by asking ourselves what the graduate learning outcomes were, and we did not just pull them out of the air. What we did was to look at a lot of what is going on out there. The McKinseys of the world that have studied the skill sets that are needed for the 21st century, the discussions at Davos and World Economic Forum, the research that academics do into these sorts of things. We engaged our stakeholder communities from alumni to employers and faculty and we put all of that together and devised a set of graduate learning outcomes, five areas. As you might imagine in an academic institution, all you need is 20 people in the room and you will have 50 different views, and each individual disagrees with himself or herself at different points in the discussion, but that was the richness of the discussion.

And so we settled after quite a lot of discussion and debate on the five areas: disciplinary and multidisciplinary knowledge, intellectual and creative skills, interpersonal skills, global citizenship, and personal mastery. All of them are very important in my own conception. But the last is a special favourite of mine—personal mastery—because it is really about getting on top of who you are as a person, getting on top of how you make decisions, how you navigate choices, how you bounce back from adversity, the resilience that you might display. And I think that many universities tend to think of these things as personal qualities that the individual cultivates himself or herself in life, but I think the university has a role to play in all of that as well.

These five areas were further broken down into subcategories and so forth, and at different points in the Blue Ribbon Commission's work, BRC for short—we kept coming back to, and we tweaked as we went along, as we thought about how we would deliver. But keeping honest, meant coming back to them and asking ourselves whether what we were proposing would contribute to these outcomes. From that, we thought about the curriculum as a whole, the academic curriculum. And basically, we had the core curriculum and the disciplinary curriculum. The disciplinary curriculum, I decided that I should respect the schools and their domain knowledge and have them take the lead in thinking about what they wanted to do there, with graduate learning outcomes in mind. But the core curriculum which cuts across the university, was where we spent significant effort thinking through what does it mean to be core, and there were many things that needed rethinking.

The university up till that point did have foundation courses, core courses, general education and just a couple of other baskets that students had to access, but it didn't kind of hang together with a certain coherence and a certain narrative and philosophy—that's what the group did. I think collectively we were quite proud of what we have devised in three pillars. The first being capabilities, the second communities and the third civilizations. And parenthetically, the alliteration speaks to us, as academics who like that sort of thing.

The capabilities pillar focuses very much on the individual capabilities, the sorts of numeracy skills, the writing skills, the managing skills, and, in a certain sense, that is what we have been doing quite well in at SMU already, and we didn't want to lose that. But we also realized that for a graduate to be

successful not just in his or her career but in life, it is not just individual capabilities that matter. It is how the individual is situated and learns to be situated within a larger community

And so we devised the communities basket with the following philosophy: that in the modern-day community, what an individual needs to navigate would be to understand the economics of it. Communities and societies are shaped and structured by how economics works, and so students need to understand economics and society, not just charts and graphs in microeconomics, but truly how economics impacts society and vice versa. So we wanted to devise a different kind of economics course in that basket within the pillar—the basket on "economies and society" within the pillar of "Communities".

Then we thought, in this day and age, for someone to navigate their community and society, they cannot but encounter technologies. And so, we devised a basket on technology and society. It is not about coding, etc. That's in computational thinking in the first capabilities basket. It is about technology and society—what does it mean for a human being to interface with technology? It is about AI and robotics—but what does this mean for my life, and how does it change the way human beings relate?

Technology and society is the second basket, and the third is on cultures. Very obviously, as we navigate communities, we need to navigate different cultures. And by cultures I don't just mean ethnic cultures, although there is that. I don't just mean national cultures, although there's that. It is also about things like urban cultures. It is also things like family cultures in business history, for example. This is the basket that is humanities-oriented. It will have cultures in the sense of ethnic cultures and national cultures and histories, and it will also have the performing arts and literary arts and so forth, but also the urban cultures that we navigate as we live in cities and so forth. We have had really good feedback from students—even though we haven't rolled out the full core curriculum, we were piloting some courses including one on urban cultures—and the feedback has been tremendous.

So that is the second pillar of communities and so moving outwards from the individual to the communities, we then moved to the larger civilizations pillar. The civilizational questions that are in a certain sense, timeless and placeless. They are things that will confront all humanity, one of which is ethical questions. And so, since day one, we have had a course on ethics and social responsibility. We all were committed to keeping that even if it meant thinking again about whether this was the way we wanted to deliver it, etc, but we were committed to this, and so it remains.

And the second basket in this pillar is something that we call big questions, and it is a course that will have themes that change over the years. This time around we are experimenting with a course called Happiness and Suffering, the big questions that confront humanity, and it is really interesting because you could approach happiness from a philosophical perspective, a neurological perspective, a psychological perspective, and that is exactly what is happening. The course will expose students to multi-disciplinary ways of thinking about a particular theme. Other possible themes over time—war and peace, wealth and poverty, law and justice. These are all areas that I think we want our students to be at least acquainted with, if not more deeply engaged with, because these are questions that they must think about at some point in time as human beings, not just the capabilities that will enable their work, important though that is.

So that is the sum total of the core curriculum, almost. There are two other dimensions. We have asked that there be a Singapore studies requirement and an Asian studies requirement. Students will have to fulfil the requirements, though it can be fulfilled from the core curriculum or from the disciplinary curriculum. If you were doing a course on doing business in China in the business school, it could fulfil the Asian studies requirement, or if you were doing a course on Singapore history in the cultures of the modern world basket, it could fulfil that Singapore studies requirement.

Finally, I would just say that we have very deliberately tried to integrate the co-curriculum with the core curriculum. We have always had a requirement for community service and internship. Well and good.

We are weaving that into those pillars as well. The capabilities pillar is where the internship requirement sits because it is about capabilities, about work capabilities. And we are also now going to make it credit-bearing, on top of it being hundred percent requirement, because we want to make explicit the learning that students are getting out of the internship. There is a lot of tacit learning, but how do they think about what they have learned, and how do they be conscious of that, that they can use some of that in their future lives?

The community service is weaved into the communities pillar, and again it will be credit-bearing and we will render visible the learning outcomes. We have set up something called the Reflective Practice Unit, which is residing with the Dean of Students outfit, and the group of colleagues there who are devising the scaffold for reflection, and a set of questions that will guide the students after they have done the community service, while they are doing the community service, and indeed before they start the community service to reflect on what it is they are trying to learn from this, and what indeed they have learned from it.

The final civilizations pillar will also have an activity component — in addition to internships and community service—this is the global exposure component, and we have asked that a hundred percent of our students have some global exposure during the course of their four years with us. We are mindful that for some students there might be some challenges if they are working part time to support the family, being away for a semester doesn't just affect them, it affects their family. We are working on ways of mitigating that, and I have seen over my years how a student who does have that global exposure comes back enriched, and I really would like for that to have touched every student's life.

Pat Meyer: It seems important…

OH Topic: Campus – Prinsep Street Residences

Lily Kong: It does. So that is just the core curriculum, and I have touched on the core curriculum, and how it is integrated. There are other dimensions yet of the core curriculum, a key part being residential living and learning. I am a firm fan of that experience having benefited from that myself. Your best friends are made when you have lived with them; the fights that you have had; the late night discussions and debates about things that are outside of the curriculum, but sometimes from the curriculum; the cookout sessions that you have had together. All that makes for firm bonding. In a business school context we talk about networking and how important that is, but this is a different level of networking altogether. It is not an instrumentalist networking, it is building ties and relationships that last for life. And it is also about learning to live independently away from home, even if you are Singaporean.

We have remade Prinsep Street Residences, and I am extremely proud of my colleagues who made that happen. If you haven't had a chance to visit it, I encourage all of you to visit it. It is a lovely heritage building conserved, and that speaks to that part of me that is an urban heritage conservation scholar and advocate. It allows old spaces to find new uses, it allows old buildings to have a refresh but keeping true to the original spirit. It allows students to have programmatic elements woven into their experience so that it is not just living, it is learning at the same time, and it is working together at the same time on projects, etc. I hope we will have the opportunity to do still more of that. We are working on some possibilities, and I hope that our students, especially our Singaporean students, will step forward and avail themselves of the opportunity. It is easy to think of international students wanting that because they need some place to stay, but the real challenge and the real success is getting Singaporean students to want to stay. So that is another dimension of the co-curriculum, if you will, that I think is very important.

We have thought really hard at the Blue Ribbon Commission about our pedagogies as well. SMU from the beginning has been known for the interactive small group seminar-style teaching and learning, and I think that's really stood our students and graduates in very good stead. It is no accident that our

students are thought to be more articulate, more confident in holding a conversation, a debate, putting forward a view, and that sort of setting has contributed to it.

OH Topic: Teaching & Curriculum – SMU-X courses

But as the world evolves, so too has SMU, and Arnoud has been the brains behind the SMU-X initiative which I have now put in the next category—aside from the collaborative and interactive learning—experiential learning. It is about getting out in the real world and experiencing the real challenges out there and learning how to navigate that. And SMU-X for those who are not so familiar, it is about students working in multidisciplinary groups with a faculty supervisor/mentor and a mentor from whichever organization it is they're working with. And within the space of a semester, they are working with the client, and delivering an outcome to them. It could be a business, it could be a government agency, it could be an NGO. And the beauty of it is that we have had repeat partners who have come back to say, "The last group did something for us that was really useful. Do you have any other groups that are interested?" And I think that speaks well for what the students have been able to do. We have students who said to us that, "Gosh, that's really stressful, that's really tough." And I have just kind of given them as motherly a look as I can muster, and to say to them that I understand, but we are not going to make it easier, but we are going to help you learn how to cope, because that is what is going to confront you in the world after university.

Interactive and collaborative learning which we have had from the beginning, experiential learning, and the third is something that I would like to try and get still more participation from our colleagues and that is personalized learning. That is recognizing students as individuals with different learning needs, recognizing individuals who have different interests, different ways of learning and responding to that. So more about that in a moment. From that one piece of small group teaching and learning which is about interactive approaches, we now have a tripod of key pedagogical philosophies, if you will, and approaches. The underlying philosophy is this, we see the student as an individual human being. Therefore, we need to respond to the individual, the student as an individual—personalized learning. But we also see that students are social beings who will interact, and they learn through that interaction. Hence the commitment, the continued commitment, to interactive and collaborative learning. But we also see students as citizens of a community, and that community could be the immediate local community, or they could be citizens of the nation or citizens of the world. And in all of that, speaking to our sense of ethics and social responsibility, they have a responsibility back to the community. So, to the extent that they are engaged in experiential learning, what they do could give back to the community. The projects that they do could be helpful to the community.

One of the favourite projects that I have encountered is the project where students work with the small retailers in Bras Basah Complex across the street, who are confronted by the world of e-retail and multi-channel retail, multi-channel marketing and all those sorts of things. And this is Uncle who is in his 60s, sitting at his shop thinking, "Do I close shop? Nobody's coming to buy my second-hand books" or whatever it is. And so our students have worked with them and helped them think about continuity. That is what I mean by giving back to the community, and, of course, they are doing many other things, other kinds of projects.

And you, Pat, shared with me a project which predated SMU-X, but is very much in the ilk of SMU-X, which is our students from SIS working with the Acehnese orphans and NGOs and tracking the education and so forth, post tsunami in 2004, I believe it was. And I would love to see more of our students doing more of all of these kinds of projects.

So just to summarize, the philosophy behind how we conceive of our students and the pedagogies that reflect that. And just two days ago in *The Straits Times*, a writer commented on how technology will take over the world of learning. And I have resisted and cajoled my colleagues to resist doing what some universities do, which is to say our target is to put 70% of our courses online or 80% or 50% or

whatever it is. And I have resisted doing that because I don't think it's just about how many courses we have online, but what do we do with the technology, and what learning outcomes are we trying to achieve, and how does it speak to our pedagogical framework and beliefs? And so I've encouraged my colleagues to think about how technology enhances the personalized learning rather than detracts from it. I have encouraged them to think about how technology contributes to the interactive and collaborative rather than to take away from it, and how does technology help the community projects that our students are doing that they can deliver something still more effectively to the community.

Just as an example with personalized learning, it is about using technology that can track a student's learning and the areas where the student's learning needs beefing up. And technology can help you with that and help the instructor identify the needs still better, and maybe even identify the resources to help the students still better. With the games, the gaming culture amongst young people, some of our colleagues are devising apps and games for the students to enhance their learning. And I have said to them, well, why won't you do games that enhance the interaction and the collaboration rather than take away from it. It is not just about sitting in front of a TV screen or a computer screen and watching a talking head. So, use the technology to enhance the interaction and collaboration. And likewise, if a student or group of students were doing a project on say food poverty in Singapore, and trying to identify where the needs are, well, geospatial mapping helps with that. Why wouldn't our colleagues in Social Sciences and SIS work together with students to devise apps and so forth that can contribute back to the community and by identifying where the needs are and finding technologies that will help the delivery of that will help to address the needs. So that is the technology that my colleagues in the Centre for Teaching Excellence have embraced.

Pat Meyer: Thank you very much for describing the undergraduate curriculum. Another area that there has been some redefinition is in research.

Lily Kong: Yes.

Pat Meyer: Previously SMU's major research areas are now organized into societal challenges and we'd like to understand more about what drove societal challenges, and if you want to take one or two as an example and just show how we want to promote research through them.

Lily Kong: Happy to. So first, I must acknowledge that a lot of this has been led by my colleague, Steve Miller, and he has just been a force behind this. Why did we embark on this? Because we were actually at what we call the HODSES, which is Heads of Department Strategic Engagement Session, which we typically have once a year. But this last year we had two, and that is because of the urgency of what we wanted to do in the research area, the enthusiasm for getting going rather than waiting another year for strategic engagement session, etc.

OH Topic: Research – Societal Challenges

So in preparation for that, we had talked about our areas of excellence, and we have identified five in the last little while, and they have been good in terms of sort of focusing our minds a little bit on some areas. But as we talked about the areas of excellence, we realized that, what was important to us was, of course, excellence, but excellence in what? To what end? What were we trying to do? And it was very clear to us when we framed it that way that what we were trying to do as a university was to do research that made a difference to society and economy and polity. And so we started thinking about, well, what are the challenges that are out there in the society and economy, etc that we were trying to address? And we started off thinking, should we be talking about Grand Challenges? And that is a familiar concept—Grand Challenges. But we also realize that we were really much more focused on societal challenges.

And so began the very interesting journey of asking ourselves what are the key societal challenges that we see, that we think as a university we can contribute to with the kind of expertise that we have within

our university? And we came down to five areas. One is understanding economies and financial markets. The second is about quality of life and social fabric of a society. The third is about managing sustainability. The fourth is about advancing innovation and technology. And the fifth is about navigating borders and boundaries because we are living in Singapore that is so open, that we need to think about it in terms of the mobilities of people, goods, services, capital, and so forth.

These five areas were also attractive because it allowed a lot of our colleagues to have a mission. The research that a lot of colleagues do somehow contribute to one or more of those dimensions. And in that sense, there was a certain sense of inclusiveness, whereas an area of excellence, to some extent connoted that there were those who were not so excellent, who were not involved in those areas. It was not the primary reason why we made the change, but it had a nice salubrious side effect in that sense. These societal challenges have now become concretized. Each of those areas has more granular elaborations which I will not go into at this point in time, because even at this broad level, I think it is easy to understand what it is we are trying to do. We have put in resources, we have encouraged our faculties to step forward with ideas for projects, and there is some quite exciting projects that have been put forward.

Just as an example of the interdisciplinary opportunities that this approach fosters, we now have colleagues in the School of Information Systems and the School of Social Sciences who have gotten together to do research on something that they have titled, *Making Smart Cities for All*. And it is looking particularly at those components of our community that are sometimes a little bit forgotten, a little bit marginal or marginalized, depending. It might be the migrant worker groups. It might be the elderly. It might be those with mental well-being challenges. It might be the caregivers who are taken for granted so often. And how does the smart city work for them? What I like about it is that it has a real engagement with the intellectual work that is going on around the world, but it also has a very real practical implication for our communities, and it is in this interdisciplinary or at least multidisciplinary—it is bringing different academic communities into conversation with one another. So that is an example of what we are trying to do, and there are more yet, and we are going to continue this effort of putting resources to encourage this kind of work. I am optimistic about what my colleagues will come up with.

Pat Meyer: The government has called for universities to provide lifelong learning opportunities for adults. Can you tell us how SMU is responding to that call and what does it mean for a university to provide by far?

OH Topic: Teaching & Curriculum -SMU Academy

Lily Kong: This was something that was in its very nascent stage when I moved to SMU and the whole space was a little bit preliminary and nascent. I had the opportunity to try and get a hold of this and to shape it. This is not to say that we haven't had professional and continuing education at SMU. We have always had that. We have had our executive development programs, and we have had our Centre for Professional Studies, and we have had institutes that do the outreach and educational programs and such. What I wanted to do and have done now is to say, come folks, let's work together, and let's devise a clarity of mission, and how we have organized it now is there's executive development, and there's SMU Academy.

SMU Executive Development is for the professional education of those who are senior executives, those with high potential. Whereas the SMU Academy is much more speaking to the Skills Future movement that has started in Singapore, led by the government, and it is much more skills-based, and it is much more rank-and-file who do need the upskilling and reskilling. So that is the conceptual division and the organizational structure. With the SMU Academy, what I did together with Arnoud was to bring together the different pockets on campus, that were doing a little bit of this work, and to consolidate it, and to devise a framework where this new SMU Academy works with the schools, works with the institutes in a collaborative way.

We have done several things. First, we have identified the four areas that we were particularly going to focus on. One is on human capital development and leadership. Two is on finance, and indeed the Skills Future statutory board has identified us to be the institution leading the finance area. Three, it is about the sort of information technology area. And four is about operations. We are devising courses. We are doing courses from the beginners, to the intermediate, to the advanced. We have devised certificate courses that can stack up to a graduate diploma or a diploma. You could do several certificates and then you could then get a diploma or a graduate diploma. And you could, in fact, stack up a certificate with a diploma, do a little bit more and get a master's degree, for example. So, all those are possibilities, and the flexibility is particularly intended for the working adult who has constraints of time, family commitments, so do what you can in bite-sized ways that are helpful to you, for your work, and then over time as you collect the credentials, you could actually stack up.

There is one other dimension that we have done, and we have piloted that very well. I think, and we were going to do still more of it. And that is something called the Professional Conversion Programs—PCP for short. It is not a creation by SMU. It is something that the government agencies have devised, but we have experimented with it and showed that it is possible to do. And this is where somebody is perhaps unemployed, is committed to go into another area of work. The employer has identified that this person has potential, if not the expertise. This person is hired by an employer, placed with us for the training and then goes to the new employer. The individual who undergoes the training is assured of a position, or it could be the same employer who has staff whose areas have become redundant. But this is a really good employee that the employer would like to keep, and it is about giving the person a chance to go into another area within the same company. This person comes to train with us and goes back to the company. It is called Professional Conversion Program because it converts them from one profession to another. The difference from the open enrolment type courses is that the individual already has a job in hand. The matching has to be done before the person goes for training, and it is work to get it done, but it is gratifying when you listen to the testimonies of these individuals who feel that they have had a second or third lease of life as a consequence of the programs. That to me, is meaningful impact.

Pat Meyer: Very inspiring. You also led a group to take a fresh look at the SMU brand. What was the motivation behind that effort and can you tell us some more about what you had done?

Lily Kong: SMU in the context of Singapore universities does already, I think, have a strong brand. There is something about the DNA of SMU that people kind of can articulate. They kind of say there is something about the graduates that is different, there is something about your institution that is different. So why did I have to go and mess with that, so to speak, right? And I don't intend to mess with that at all. When I thought about getting into this, it is just that I thought there were many excellent dimensions of the brand such as what I have just articulated, but sometimes people couldn't quite say what it was, and sometimes people thought about SMU in terms of the very original imagery associated with SMU, which was a lovely bunch of lively kids jumping in the air. It was revolutionary for its time. I remember sitting in NUS thinking that is a refreshing ad. That demonstrates a very vibrant community. But over time, and that means 15 years, I thought maybe we needed a different image of who it is we are, while not losing the essence of who we are.

That was a key part of it and I started engaging colleagues and talking with them about—What do you think SMU stands for? What do you want SMU to stand for? We did the consultations and we brought in the consultants and so forth. And when we polled our colleagues, there were a few things that came up, that were not about jumping kids. It was about making impact. It was about innovation as a university, being innovative. Those were two key things that came up. But when I asked through some of those polls and conversations and focus groups, what would you like SMU to be known for going ahead? That notion of a university that is making meaningful impact on the community came through quite strongly, and we had a trustee who said, "Actually, that already is part of who we are, and we are

recognized for part of it, even if we don't articulate it that explicitly right now." That there is something about social responsibility that SMU to an extent is associated with already.

All of that input and the help of my colleagues and consultants allowed us to land on the position that what this university stands for is about making meaningful impact. And then it was a question about how do we render that visible and how do we manifest that and so forth. And I think we are running a very successful campaign. We started last year with a campaign that we call *Imagine Better*, that speaks to meaningful impact. So, imagine an undergraduate education that helps you to make the world better, or whatever it is. And I was really heartened when on the first real public occasion when we did that and multiple smaller occasions, very quickly my colleagues from other universities said "Oh, that's refreshing, that's a different take, and that's really meaningful." A brand is not just about advertisements or taglines or images. It is about what we are and who we stand for and what values we live by. I would say it is work in progress, and it will always be work in progress because it is about continually embedding those values, the commitment to them and in living them out. So, my hope is that we will continue to walk that journey of making meaningful impact together.

Pat Meyer: Thank you very much for today.

Lily Kong: Thank you.

Acronyms

BRC-UG	Blue Ribbon Commission for Undergraduate Education
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
NUS	National University of Singapore
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America