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Up close and personal with Hugh Edmiston: Engineering SMU towards growth and excellence

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Up close and personal with Hugh Edmiston: Engineering SMU towards Growth and Excellence

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So what can a chartered engineer from the United Kingdom tell us about our aspirations to contribute to growth in Asia, as a young university in Singapore? As I found out...plenty. And then some. Meet SMU Senior Vice-President (Administration) Hugh Edmiston, who joined us just as COVID-19 hit our shores ("Little did I know there was a global pandemic on the horizon when I moved!"); and read on to learn more about his multiple roles and responsibilities in SMU as he drives our growth in Asia.

Bervyn: Tell us a little more about yourself, your journey thus far in your career, and perhaps one or two interesting things on that journey.

Hugh: I began my career with the London Underground, the network lies beneath the water table of the River Thames and my job was to keep it dry. A complex system of pumps is used to manage the amount of water ingress; without which it would flood within 3 to 4 days. I had about 60 engineers and electricians working with me and we would go out across London at night to make sure the pumps were running. The London Underground first opened in 1863, it has seen the two World Wars, so there is a lot of interesting history, with stories of bunkers and ghosts which made it quite an interesting place to work!

I was also part of a change management team that transformed the London Underground culture from one that was engineer-led, to one that was passenger-focused. Previously, the engineers working at night decided when maintenance should be carried out – but the station staff working during the day had to deal with the inconvenience caused to the passengers. We had to change that culture and adopt a more customer focused approach where we could carry out essential maintenance whilst minimizing the impact on the passenger. That was my first exposure to corporate change on a large scale.

Bervyn: Like the London Underground, where did you head to next? What was the next stop?

Hugh: After 8 years I moved from London to Cambridgeshire and took up a director position at the Silsoe Research Institute, this was my first real exposure to academics. This institution was established just after the second world war and tasked with mechanising agriculture. The

Institution was highly successful but as the last century turned, the interest from the UK Research Councils moved towards plant biology and genetics. After an enjoyable 7 years, strategic funding was withdrawn and I was asked to close the Institution and to relocate the research to other organisations. I was expecting to be made redundant but as it turned out, the UK Research Council offered me a position at another research institution, the Roslin Institute in Scotland, home of Dolly the Sheep, the first successfully cloned animal.

After working at Roslin for a few years I was tasked with merging the Institute into the University of Edinburgh, and we joined the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine. Following the merger, I was asked by the Head of the College to apply for the position of Registrar, which I did and was successful. Three days into my new appointment, my new boss was asked to run the UK Medical Research Council in London, and I ended up running the operations of College with a clinical academic colleague for the next 5 years and during this time we did a number of other mergers and acquisitions for the University.

I then moved on to become Director of Corporate Services at the University, and concurrently held the position of Vice-Principal - Business Development for the University. The University did about 800 million to a billion dollars of research annually, and my job was to support the commercialisation of that research.

The biggest deals I had the opportunity to be part of was to secure a £1.2 billion city deal grant for the University of Edinburgh and the City of Edinburgh. The University received half of the grant to undertake research on data driven innovation. It was the largest grant awarded to any UK university, we did this in partnership with the City Council together with 6 Regional Councils, the Scottish and UK governments.

Bervyn: That sounds like a really huge task, this city deal! What were some of the challenges you faced?

Hugh: There was the challenge of motivating faculty to pick up the reins of some of this work. When all the euphoria had died down the hard work really started; once established it became a matter of managing routine and I was interested to see where my role might develop next.

Bervyn: True...but that is a good question...where did you go next?

Hugh: I turned my attention to China. We developed a partnership with the China Merchants Group, the Hainan and Shenzhen Governments to focus on a series of diabetes clinics and low carbon technology and we worked in partnership with the Shanghai Jiao Tong University to develop an undergraduate medical programme; and so my last two years with the University I travelled regularly between the UK and China.

Bervyn: And that led you to Singapore, to SMU?

Hugh: There were a number of factors associated with that. My wife and I had always discussed about the opportunity of working abroad once the kids had grown up and left home; the routine of commuting to Edinburgh was becoming more inconvenient, particularly during the winter. I wasn't really looking for a job, and when a head-hunter contacted me about this position at SMU, I didn't pay much attention initially, until I realized I was recommended by an old colleague and friend from the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, and as a matter of courtesy, decided to explore the opportunity, and I became rather intrigued.

Bervyn: What was it that intrigued you?

Hugh: SMU is a young and relatively small University as opposed to an old and large University like Edinburgh but both are City Universities. Some of the challenges that Singapore face are opposite to what Edinburgh has experienced, and I was also impressed with the approach SMU takes towards education and supporting the student experience.

Singapore also intrigues me as the gateway to Asia, with a highly diverse population, a strong Asian influence from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia; but with traditional ties back to Britain, yet Singapore has struck out on its own and developed a model that is recognised globally as being successful. This was interesting to me.

Little did I know there was a global pandemic on the horizon when I moved!

Bervyn: Yes! I recall you joining us and having to serve your quarantine first.

Hugh: That's right...I literally flew in just as Singapore went into circuit breaker; so it has now been about 15 months and I have yet to enjoy the full Singapore experience. I got a flavour of it in March this year when we moved to Phase 3 but unfortunately things have tightened up again. So I feel I don't know SMU that well yet as the majority of my experience has been virtual.

Bervyn: About the job...can you tell us more about your role as Senior Vice-President (Administration) at SMU?

Hugh: I work with my colleagues to look after the primary services of the University which includes the campus services, finance, the IT infrastructure and network, and human resources; and my role is to support my colleagues in the running of these services efficiently and effectively to support the delivery of education and research, and to develop and implement initiatives that support the delivery of SMU's 2025 objectives.

Bervyn: What do you see are some of the key challenges over the next 20 years?

Hugh: I think one of the key challenges is how we develop a more customer-related approach to deliver some of these services. We tend to be operationally-focused when we need to reach across professional services and take a more integrated approach. We need to spend more time with our faculty colleagues, improve some of the current processes and tools available so that they may focus on their academic tasks.

Bervyn: Thank you for that! But you do have other areas of responsibility...can you talk us through these?

Hugh: The other part of my job is looking after the 4 'I's – *Internationalisation, Innovation, Industry and Integration*. For Internationalisation, we are looking to further develop and expand our international relationships, with a focus on growth in Southeast Asia; for Innovation, we are exploring various models that would expand innovation opportunities for SMU and to further develop facilities and services that contribute to the innovation ecosystem across Singapore and linked to this is how we engage with industry and how we partner and provide services and support education and research as part of that ecosystem.

Bervyn: You mentioned growth in Southeast Asia...can you tell us more about this, as "Growth in Asia" is one of SMU's Vision 2025 strategic priorities?

Hugh: First, it is natural for SMU and Singapore to look towards its neighbours and connect with them even more effectively than we have in the past; and to also be the facilitator between the east and the west. That's a role that SMU can contribute to from 3 perspectives – research, education, and innovation. In addition, we can look to how we work with industry, our partners and with our alumni.

I believe the model for many universities will fundamentally change over the next 5-10 years. Much of this has been discussed over the last decade but the long term implications of Covid together with the acceleration of digital technology has started to translate some of these discussions into actions. Given the evolving new normal any university can now reach out internationally and offer a digital programme. Evidence is starting to show that students are becoming more interested in the quality and relevance of educational programmes than the hallowed halls of the older universities. This will introduce more competition into the sector, it will open up opportunities for the newer universities, and pose a threat to the more traditional well established universities that have tended to rely on their reputations. SMU should try to capitalize on this opportunity, and use technology to springboard into Southeast Asia before the large international universities seek to recover and expand their market share

Bervyn: Where should we start in Southeast Asia?

Hugh: That is one of the challenges. We have undertaken a review to consider which of the Southeast Asian countries we should prioritise. We have decided to focus on Indonesia first, then Thailand and we have created an international working group to help support and develop a number of initiatives. It is easy to become overloaded with ideas each time we meet, so we will need to pick three or four projects, to test, develop then implement so that over time we further our overseas reputation.

Bervyn: Speaking of challenges...are there any others? Conversely, what are the opportunities?

Hugh: One of the key challenges is COVID-19. COVID-19 is currently preventing us from having an actual physical presence in these countries which I suspect may continue for the next few years. We will use this time to focus on the development of our propositions, implement them remotely and work with our Indonesian colleagues to determine what would be attractive to them as our partners in research, education, and industry.

One other challenge and opportunity, is associated with our specialist nature as a University. For innovation we are limited in part by our subject areas which don't include engineering or medicine. However, we provide research, educational programmes, expertise to industry and commerce via our Schools, Institutes and Centre.

I am now starting to see a number of the western universities looking towards Southeast Asia as they recover from COVID-19, considering how can they might, for example, access Indonesia to secure young talented people for their programmes that would help rebuild their University's long term financial sustainability. One opportunity that SMU may consider is to act as strategic broker in leading and creating regional partnerships with some of the best universities that offer opportunities for our Southeast Asian neighbours. If we decide this is to be one of our priorities we may carve out a niche that would align to the agenda of the Singapore Government, to bring in talent, new ideas and innovation to support our own innovation ecosystem; and then use that as a springboard into Southeast Asia. I think as some governments become more introverted, as we start to exit Covid we need global universities to strengthen their partnerships, to use their expertise and resources towards solving global challenges. SMU can play a part in brokering relationships that will benefit the Singaporean local economy, its population; as well as the region.

Bervyn: You mentioned our alumni earlier...if there were one or two things you would put out there that our alumni could do to contribute to this journey, what would these be?

Hugh: Please be patient with us. These things take time, and building such propositions will require patience, long term support but with a sense of energy and urgency. Most importantly as these plans develop we will need to access our alumni colleagues, their networks and support, together with contributions from the community.

I do think there has to be something in it for our alumni too. Whatever we do, we need to ensure that it adds value. It must contribute towards the SMU reputation and profile; bringing individuals together to form cohesive groups, where they see benefit and opportunity. It has to be sustainable; and it has to be attractive to the intended audience. As part of SMU, our alumni will need to see the value and benefit too.

Bervyn: One final question...is there a philosophy you live by? Any guiding principles?

Hugh: Openness and Honesty. We have to be open and honest with people so we all know where we stand on matters. I try to be fair-minded and empathize with people, I believe this builds trust, that helps navigate complex and challenging issues. This has served me well.

I also believe in empowering people and having the freedom to fail and we need to build this appropriately into our sense of culture. There is a balance to be struck but acceptable failure is essential in building a culture of innovation and we have to accept that colleagues will do things in a different way, and to trust them.

There is a famous but rather long saying by Theodore Roosevelt which is a little gender bias in today's age but the principles of which I believe in "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Ellen DeGeneres captures some of the sentiment in a more succinct way, "that when you take risks you learn that there will be times when you succeed and there will be times when you fail, and both are equally important."

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