13-3-2018

Interview with Howard Hunter: Creating a new management university

Howard HUNTER
Singapore Management University, howardhunter@smu.edu.sg

Singapore Management University

Book project with working title “Creating a new management university: Tracking the strategy of SMU, 1997-2019/20” by Prof Howard Thomas

Interviewee:	Howard Hunter (HH)
Interviewer:	Tan Siok Sun (TSS) & Howard Thomas (HT)
Date:	13 March 2018
Location:	SMU Studio, Level 5, Li Ka Shing Library, Singapore
Transcriber:	Cheryl Delos Santos & Yeo Pin Pin (SMU Libraries)

TSS: Today is Tuesday, the 13th of March 2018. With me at the studio today, is Professor Howard Hunter, the third president of the SMU and we're here for Professor Howard Thomas book on SMU and strategic decisions, 1998 to 2018. Professor Hunter, when you came to Singapore, wasn't your first time in 2006 to take up the appointment?

HH: Well now, actually the first time was in 2002, when I came as a consultant, and in 2004 I came as the president.

TSS: Correct. But as president it was 2006?

HH: 2004.

TSS: As president?

HH: Yes.

TSS: Okay. There were only five schools. Were there five schools?

HH: Well, there was, there was Business, Economics, Social Science and Information Systems and Accountancy. That's Economics and Social Science were one school at that time, they were not two different schools.

TSS: And there was no Law School?

HH: No law school.

TSS: When you accepted the offer to be president of SMU, was it very clear that one of your mandate was to start the law school?

HH: That depended a bit on which person had the conversation, because some were keen on having a second law school in Singapore and some members of the profession were not so keen on having a second one. And when I had come in 2002, it was to consult on the development of the law curriculum at SMU. And I came away from that serious meetings thinking that very unlikely that there would be a second school within the near future, although it was certainly fine for SMU to have a very good law department, and to train people in legal thinking, though not necessarily to become lawyers.

TSS: Why would that be, professor?

HH: Well, I had start a series of meetings in 2002 with members of the profession, as well as other academics and with members of the judiciary, and my impressions from that were that there was a fair amount of resistance to the idea of a second law school. That is, unfortunately, my phone which I shut off.

TSS: Why would there be, why would there be resistance when demand was really picking up?

HH: It wasn't clear at that time there's demand, because 2002 was right at the end of the dot-com collapse, and the business cycle was in a downward phase at that moment. Also, Singapore for a long time had the practice and still does, of allowing people to

enter the profession from a series of foreign law schools, mostly in England and Australia and a few other places. And so there was a feeling that there's an adequate supply with NUS locally and the foreign law schools. That changed quickly though. And by the time I came in 2004, it began to be apparent that there would be serious discussions about having a second law school, and then that gained momentum over the next couple of years.

TSS: And looking back, starting the second law school in some ways, it's almost like the creation of SMU too. You're starting a new law school with no track record, how did you and your team persuade would-be law students to come to SMU?

HH: That well, you're exactly right. Because here we are a new law school. If you're a bright student coming out of JC in Singapore, you've got a very fine well-established law school at NUS and their options are in England and Australia in particular, were very attractive. So how did we break into that? Well, one way we were able to get started quickly, related to the creation of the law department and the business school. When the business school was first begun, as part of the original SMU, we were able to recruit a series of really good, a collection of really good law faculty led by now Judge of Appeal, Andrew Phang. And Judge Phang, somebody that I've known for a very long time through professional connections. And he had moved over from NUS to be head of the new law department at SMU in the business school. And he had pulled together a core group of about a dozen faculty, who were very strong, very attractive and most of them are still here and part of our faculty. So that was an attractive group in the first place. Second, we had some track record at SMU. So SMU itself was something of an attractant to people who wanted to be in a different kind of university and to be in the center of the city, because we've moved into the Bras Basah campus by that time. And then we use those particular items to our maximum advantage, and we had a wonderful director of admissions, Alan Goh, who was since retired, who was very creative in presenting the SMU story and we were able to.

TSS: So it was, you had SMU to

HH: Yes, but I will tell you that it was a little bit scary because the approval came, oh about this time of year, about the time that the admissions process gets started and we were already in the admissions process but we didn't have approval for Law School. So we weren't seeking law students and I got a call from the permanent secretary of MOE and confirming that it had been approved and so forth and I said to him, this is good. This will give us about an 18-month lead up to bringing in our first class, and it was kind of silence. They said no, we want you to have your first class in August of this year which was only a few months away. And I said what? He said you can do it, and we did, but it was a little bit nervous.

TSS: **Would the perm sec be**? Can you recall?

HH: The perm sec at that time is Lim Chuan Poh.

TSS: Okay, was MOE very involved in the creation?

HH: They were very helpful. They deferred to Min Law (Ministry of Law) on many aspects of this as well as to the Law Society and to the judiciary but on the sort of administrative

side of getting the school organized and going and developing, we had a lot of support from the Ministry of Education.

TSS: Did the curriculum that was being offered by school of law play a part? Were you leveraging on the fact that it would be more cross-border areas?

HH: It helped in several ways. One in developing our curriculum, we had a curricular working group which included representatives from the profession, from the judiciary and from the Academy. And we had to meet certain core requirements because to become a member of the profession, there's a core body of knowledge every lawyer must master. And so we had that as our core. But then there was a lot of discussion about what else should be in the curriculum and some members of that curricular working group, most notably members of the profession, the practicing lawyers, thought that we should have 50% law and 50% non-law. They were very interested in lawyers learning about economics, history, culture, language, and subjects like that and not just law. Interestingly, some of the academics were the most conservative and were in favor of a much heavier law mixture into the group. So we wound up with a curriculum that was about 68-70 percent non-law, and the rest straight law courses which reflected the overall SMU experience of a basic liberal education, plus majoring and then focusing on certain subject areas. And I think that was quite attractive, plus our pedagogical approach with a smaller classes and a Socratic method of teaching.

TSS: By 2007, by the time you got your first batch in obviously the speed at which the law school came about which surprised even you, it must have something to do with demand?

HH: Oh at that time was quite a bit of demand. The law profession was expanding and there were several factors involved with that. One the economy had rebounded dramatically from the post dot-com collapse, and also the SARS came right after the dot-com collapse and that affected the economy here. So there'd been a lot of recovery from that, which in the normal course would increase the demand for people in the legal profession, but more to the point, Singapore was positioning itself as a legal center for the region in the area, a place for companies to come to seek legal advice, the opportunities for law firms from elsewhere to move here were made more attractive. And Singapore began to build its reputation as an arbitration center and mediation center, and now we have a commercial court as well as the arbitrations so it was part of it. It was a result of several factors coming together at the same time.

TSS: Your law school tracks the alumni?

HH: Yes, we do.

TSS: And where have they? How have they done?

HH: Most of them are here in Singapore, but we have people, law alumni in many places around the world. We got some in Hong Kong, London, Dubai, one or two in North America, and some are with multinational firms, either multinational law firms or corporations with multinational assets.

TSS: And with the judiciary too?

HH: We don't yet have one on the bench. But I do think we will soon, and today I had lunch with one of my former students, Souza in the Attorney General's Office, and he's getting married to another of my former students, who is a prosecutor, working primarily on drug cases and, and physical violence cases. It's a mixture of different professions. We do have one in Parliament.

TSS: And that would be?

HH: His surname is Singh. He's a member of the Workers Party in the opposition, one of our JD graduate.

TSS: Can I now move on to relations with the Ministry of Education? In your years as president, did you notice any shift in MOE, either in focus or with regards to education issues? Maybe with regards to number of foreign students or any other area?

HH: Well, there was several changes. We, in the early years when SMU was first getting started, Teo Chee Hean was the Minister of Education and it was followed by Tharman, and both of them were deeply involved in the beginnings of SMU, and I think each of them had, had some special interest in the University. Not that they neglected any of their other responsibilities. But it was something that was mooted as an idea of while they were involved with MOE. And they were both close to Dr. Tan, who was one of the driving forces. Then we went through a period. We've always had very good relations with MOE and very strong support from them in everything we've done. But the focus shifted a bit in two ways. One was the creation of SUTD, the fourth University. Then the Medical School to go with NTU. And interestingly, this was a pet project of Ng Eng Hen when he was the minister, the creation of SIT, which I found fascinating, because it was a bit different from the creation of SMU, but still trying out a totally new approach to tertiary education. SMU was the first private, not-for-profit autonomous, state-supported University. And when I came here, there wasn't any other university in the whole world that was organized quite like that. And then that worked and NTU, NUS were changed, SUTD went on that model. SIT was to create a university here in Singapore, with articulation agreements with, based in the polytechnics, but with articulation agreements with universities overseas. So that Singapore poly students could continue right on to university, with these connections, and that was different from anything else around the world. And it seems to have worked quite well. So, the focus during that time period shifted to this new idea, because we were kind of percolating along okay.

TSS: Okay. So they were not breathing down our, our necks in that, that sense?

HH: No, not at all, and then there was the current Ministry, of course, they've divided now into one for higher education and one that's primarily schools. I remember Tharman saying, when he was minister that he had done some work in other ministries before education. And he thought he had a lot of advisors, but when he moved into MOE, he realized he had five million advisors and each one of them called every day.

TSS: If I could move on to our board of trustees, a lot of outsiders have told us that we have a very strong board of trustees, perhaps because we are not privileged to what happens at trustee meetings. You could comment on the tenor at, of what meetings, how

chairmen of subcommittees were chosen and whether you had worked particularly more intensively with one or two particular past trustee member.

HH: Yeah, it is a good board. It's been a good board from the very beginning, and I think one of the reasons that it's worked well, is that there's been a nice mixture of people from Singapore and elsewhere. So the Singaporean board kind of roots it here and keeps the Singapore flavor and they're also physically near, so that it's easier to consult back and forth sometimes. But by bringing in strong people from the outside, it opens up the discussions in a way that might not happen if it were more insular kind of board, and there's been a good mixture of people, who've stayed on the board for stability and institutional memory, maybe go off for a while and come back, plus regular turnover, so they're fresh faces that, that come in. There were relatively small number of standing committees. It's a bit larger now than before but except for one of them, usually the chair of the standing committee was based here in Singapore. Now, it was not always a Singaporean, it might have been expat or a permanent resident who was working here, but for practical reasons it was good to have the chair close by and in the same time zone. For the Academic Affairs Committee were usually, and I think that's still true, focused heavily on the academic members of the committee, I mean of the board, who understood the sort of process by which appointments and promotions were made. The chemistry just worked really well, for the most part and there's nothing particularly secret about the meetings, maybe most of the hard work took place in the committees which is, I think typical of any organization.

TSS: Which committees were you're personally involved with?

HH: Oh, I was involved with all of them, but I'm saying that the two that I worked with most closely over time were the Finance and Remuneration Committee, because that was the one that focused a lot on the budget issues, and the Academic Affairs Committee which was building up the faculty. Now, we created the Investment Committee, once we had a sufficient amount of money to start investing the endowment more strategically and worked quite closely with that one over, particularly in the beginning, when it's getting going. The Campus Development Committee kind of went up and down and so forth, because when we're building this campus and we are out at Bukit Timah, it was very important and then we had a relatively quiet period where we did refurbishing or some additional stuff, but not big projects so that's one, up and down.

TSS: You were personally very involved with the advancement team, I recall.

HH: Yes.

TSS: Can you comment on advancement as you knew it before you join SMU and the SMU brand of advancement?

HH: Well, I'm having been in a private university for almost 30 years, I was and having been still an alumnus of a private university. I was aware of how advancement works within that sector, but here, we had a public university although technically speaking a private, autonomous university and we were trying to create a mechanism for private development over an extended period of time and so we borrowed heavily from past experiences of other institutions. I think, I sent our in-house team that did investments for the endowments, I sent them to Yale to do a crash course in how Yale managed its

endowment investments and so on. And, they got a lot of very good ideas from that, but one of the things that they were trying to do at the beginning, we had two things working out, big gifts, capital gifts, major gifts for certain kinds of things, and then also developing a culture of participation in giving, by engaging students and early alumni, and it didn't really matter whether they gave five dollars or five hundred dollars, it was a matter of getting people engaged over time and that was terrifically important because that'll pay off twenty, thirty years from now and continue to pay off. But raising funds is essentially the same wherever you go, you just got to learn the particulars of the local culture, and about how well you mix the approaches. The government makes it a little easier in here because they match gifts and they give a double tax deduction or sometimes it's two and a half times, which does encourage private giving.

TSS: So you would have been with SMU for more than ten years now, you want to share your thoughts about your expectations, the mandate you were given when you first came to be our third president and how you feel the school has progressed?

HH: Yeah, it's been 14 very satisfying years. I mean when it came as a bit of it's still a real experiment, we didn't have that many students, we had a small faculty, we were at the lovely but somewhat provincial Bukit Timah campus, and for almost camping out, because everybody knew we were there for a short time and then and so we didn't do that much too, and we had to build this and move in here, and the number, the size has increased dramatically and faster than I ever anticipated. In fact, what some people don't realize is that the original plan for SMU, the whole concept was based on a maximum undergraduate body of 6,000 and a maximum enrollment of 7,500 including post grads, that was the whole conceptual notion of size, where it's located. We have about 10,000 students now, that growth has been particularly rapid but it's partly because I think we filled a, we responded to a need, and then we're able to capitalize on that. And the reputation of the University has become quite strong outside Singapore too, partly because we've had good students from China and India and other parts of Southeast Asia, but also because we have attracted faculty, who then have fed back into the warp, in those other countries and areas. And it's grown, the whole University, the enterprise grown much faster than I ever expected it to do and it's very satisfying to watch them.

TSS: You've commented that SMU is an experiment in diversity, do you think we have been true to that, I mean are we still keeping up with..

HH: We need to be sure that we pay attention to that all the time, and that's a terrifically important notion in Singapore, the good Singapore. Whole identity is one of diversity of people's ideas living together, in small island, so I think that's a critical part of what we should try to continue to do and by diversity, I mean not only diversity inside Singapore but with ideas and with bringing people in from the outside, in our programs whether its students or its faculty or visitors.

TSS: It's, it's the culture I guess, you need to have this culture of believing that you're only a digit in a far larger world and we do that through, you know our study missions, students going abroad and internship. Is there something that really struck you in your years with SMU, in the sense that, what if you had to choose one or two or three critical factors, what do you, you think made SMU where it is now? What did we get right in the formula, bearing in mind that there was no template?

HH: Well, I think one of the most important things was a decision made by several of the principal people in the government who were responsible for helping get this project started, to be hands-off and to allow the project to develop itself organically. I mean one of them, I won't name him, he said you know it doesn't matter if you fail, because if you do we will have learned something, but what does matter is that you try things and try them out in different kinds of ways. Now, I don't think they could have taken that experiment with NUS or NTU because the two institutions were already so big and important and stable and all, and you, you're reluctant to sort of tinker with something that's a major institution like that. But the willingness to allow this experiment really to flourish on its own and to be willing to accept if that were to happen that there might be some failures, was I thought that a refreshing kind of approach and one that worked very well, in that instance. So that was one of the really positive aspects of working with some of the people who helped get it started. Now, I hope that we can continue that experimentation over a longer period of time because as an institution gets larger, it does tend to become more bureaucratized and static, and it's hard to maintain that kind of constant renewal and experimentation notion within the institution.

TSS: It's short of a cultural revolution within the university. Do you think that SMU will still be able to maintain the perception that it is a different University for the next decade and how can it do it in its curriculum?

HH: I think that's to be a great deal of focus on a couple of things that were at the heart of the original idea. One was the notion of a liberal education, that is you'll find in every university, and I don't care where it is in the world that as professors become more specialized themselves, they will tend to think that if a student is going to learn this subject that students got to take not, one not two, but half a dozen ever more narrow courses on this subject, so you'll tend to get a curriculum that gets more and more and more pieces in it. And I think that's to be some resistance to that so that the students only 18, 19, 20 years old have an opportunity to be exposed to the ideas that will be important to them for the rest of their lives, to allow them to see the breadth and complexities of societies and interactions. So I think focusing, not focusing, but rather maintaining that commitment to the core liberal education as part of what everyone is doing, whether it's accountancy or law or business or computer science, is critically important to the concept of what SMU is about. The same thing with other kinds of experiments. We have, for a variety of reasons, the favorite kind of course or module here, once a week, three-hour seminar for a semester. Now if you're running the registrar's office or somewhere like that, if you've got a certain model, then it's easier in terms of running your scheduling algorithms to plug everybody into the same model. I'd like to see a little bit more experimentation and flexibility with that, so that we might have some that are shorter, some that are longer, some other a half a semester, some that are two, and so on. The tendency to revert to a norm, particularly when the norm can be easier to maintain. The other thing is really important, it don't have to do with curriculum where students or stuff, it's maintaining a strong, dynamic and interesting Board of Trustees. One of the most important things in the success of SMU, was the selection of our chairman, Ho Kwon Ping. We were really lucky because Kwon Ping is smart, he is a risk taker, and he is easy to work with and he's got very high standards. And having somebody like that, as the chair, so he sets the tone for the whole board.

TSS: And the longevity of the chairmanship, I think is also very important. Would it be correct to say that with the establishment of the law school, it's very clear that SMU is indeed a social science university?

HH: I think it has been really from the beginning, although not called quite that. And I think yeah, and there's been some discussion over time of having another school, might be a school of humanities or something like that, but that focuses on history and regional culture, language, literature. We do courses and all that now, but that's not a school focus.

TSS: Discuss about liberal arts and during your time?

HH: I don't think will, I don't think will do the hard sciences or with wet labs and things or no intention. But I will say this was kind of an interesting aside maybe, they're probably in the first six months I was here, for reasons which are not all very clear to me. My Provost at that time, Tan Ching Chong and I were invited to the Medical Association of Singapore gathering. They have kind a clubhouse behind Singapore General Hospital. You know, I've been to Singapore and I thought I have been invited to a lot of lunches something, but wasn't quite sure why these doctors were. So I go, and while we're there for this pleasant lunch, they make a pitch to us about starting a medical school. Oh my goodness gracious. I mean we're just starting the university. We're still at Bukit Timah. I first came to talk about a law school and I've just come from a university of there's a huge medical establishment and I was so glad to get away from having to worry about everything that goes on there. Since then, of course the Duke-NUS Medical School that started there, just almost adjacent to that clubhouse, and now we also have the NTU medical school together with Imperial College, but it was clear that there was another group of professionals who were arguing for an expansion of their sector, of the university landscape as well, and they saw us as this experimental new kind of exciting place and wanted to latch on to it. Although there's certainly wasn't any room in Bras Basah for a medical school.

TSS: Is there any room for a merger with one of the specialized universities we've had since then, SUTD?

HH: I think that the most logical one would be SUTD. We do some courses for them now and our students are allowed to take some of their courses. Although I think the traffic is mostly from them to us, for a variety of reasons, but they're trying to fit more with the SMU model.

TSS: It's quite usual for CEOs or presidents when, when they hand over to, to their successor just to say - probably it would have to pay more attention to this area or that area. Can I know when you handed over to Arnoud De Meyer, were there one or two areas at that time, which you felt that would be of high importance to the university's development then? Can you recall?

HH: Yeah. Well there were several. I mean some were just internal management kinds of things which change over time, and getting the mixture of people in different departments, managerial kinds of administrative things. What was important, but on the larger picture, continuing to have a reasonable system in place and a kind of a pipeline in place for the succession of deans and senior academic types, was very important.

When you start a brand new, as we were, it's not unusual to have two groups of faculty, senior and really junior, and not much in the middle. There are several reasons. One simple one was we're in Singapore, if you're gonna have a proper university, you need people with terminal degrees PhDs or whatever the terminal degrees, you could take all the PhDs in Singapore in the year 2000 and 2002 and there's not enough of them to fill up the faculty slots at the two universities, much less a third one, and we had a specific directive from MOE, when all three of us at the time, don't just turn your faculty around. We don't want people moving from Kent Ridge to NTU to SMU and back and around. We want you to bring in talent and nurture talent local. So we had to find people overseas to large extent, or we had to nurture people who were young here in Singapore. Now, if you looking to bring somebody from overseas, you're more likely to be more successful with somebody who's more senior, with children who are largely grown or out of the house, than you are with somebody who's got three kids, who are 4, 8 and 12 and all in school, and trying to move them here and so forth becomes more difficult. Same thing at the starting level, assistant professor maybe, maybe just a couple or something, they'll maybe, they're unmarried, but they don't have the extra burdens that come along family life in their 30s and 40s. So that's to get started now. If you're gonna build a university over time, you've got to fill in that middle somehow and you've got to have people in that middle who are moving up into leadership positions, plus the development of connections with other institutions that kind of feed into that. And so, Arnoud and I talked a lot about that issue, we spent a lot of time on and in fact, for years I have been teaching an intensive course and a graduate program in Budapest. And at the end of my teaching, this is a spring of 2010, I went to Paris and spent three days with him, most of it cloistered in his apartment, talking about issues like this and going over budgets and details and one thing you know. And I think it's turned out reasonably well, we got, we've had for some time now, some changes in leadership in the schools but stability at the same time with quality people.

TSS: What qualities were you looking for as dean considering that you know that's the stage we found ourselves in which you've just described very well? Could you just elaborate and considering the constraints of trying to persuade somebody you really would like to join SMU but the person is unable for, for personal reasons to come?

HH: Yes, well the latter one was very hard sometimes, and we made some accommodations in a few cases where people would come for six months and until they could get their situation sorted out, and then they'd come full time. But we found people like my colleague Howard Thomas who's in the room with us. And he had had experience in both the United States and the UK as a Dean, and so he had the experience of running a business school. Both large business schools, both very important business schools and two different kinds of national cultures, and that experience could easily be brought here to this kind of arena, where we're creating a new kind of university and business school. So that that was one aspect my second Provost, Raj Srivastava, was of Indian heritage and once said you know one of the great things about Singapore is that, as close to my family but it's not in my family. So he could go and see his family and look now easily, and look after them back and forth but it wasn't right in the middle of it all the time. And he had a long time of experience in the United States. There's PhD in the teaching at Texas and Emory, so he brought that experience plus his experience from India to begin with, which with a nice mixture for Singapore. And I think one of our most interesting deans, they're all interesting, they have been quite good. But in terms of background, Steve Miller, who started the information system school, that was a kind

of a American, began his career at Carnegie Mellon, he left academia, and went into industry for a while to learn more about it, in fact even worked on the shop floor in a Japanese company in Japan for a while because he wants to know more about how the computer business and electronics business work from the bottom right on up, learnt Japanese, so he could do that. And he'd a lot of experience with major firms in the IT world and he saw this gap in the academic world between pure kind of computer science and so forth. And the applications of it in the business and corporate world and elsewhere, the information system school was designed really to kind of bridge that gap. Really, a very different kind of school and it's been a real success. I think it's become a model for some other schools, our departments within business schools around the world. So, then we would get some pretty good people, and I think now we I've gotten a second maybe second, third generation or more in that middle level I was talking about in terms of age and experience.

TSS: Professor Thomas was sharing with me that before he came to Singapore, he was given to understand that the business school is this is.., almost like more, this is the core now or core plus plus plus, and then he discovered actually that you know all the other schools had an equal part to play as a part of SMU.

HH: Well, you know the original idea back in the 90s or late 90s, being discussed was a free-standing business school. And there was some talk early on about, simply taking over what was then called, Singapore Institute of Management, SIM, and making it a free-standing business school under the MOE. And consultations between people here and some people from the Sloan School and some people from the Wharton School now instead, led to the decision that now what we really want. Yes, we want the core business school, but we really need a university of which the Business School is a part rather than a separate totally independent one. Because we're not gonna do an Insead kind of model. It's gonna be undergraduate and postgraduate. It's gonna be a mix, and we want to serve maybe a bigger kinda community. So that kind got built into the original, of course the business school is the first one. It's the biggest school of the bunch and the others in one way or another compliment a lot of what is done in the business school, but I think, we had a retreat, board retreat well, must have been 12 years ago, I think it was. We went to what was then, the brand-spanking-new, One Degree North Marina at Sentosa. That was about all that was on Sentosa in fact at that time. And we spent a day and half talking about things. And the concept that came out of that, the trustees, was what we're really trying to create is a, sort of the Singapore version of LSE, where it's not the economics faculty, that's not really LSE, there was political economy. There's the Business School, which is at the core, with the kind of conceptual notion of a social sciences university, built around the core, in a way that LSE has developed over the years.

TSS: What year was that?

HH: About 2006

TSS: You hadn't, you were not here then yes. The retreat is about every year, every two years?

HH: Every two years.

TSS: Every two years. Could I turn to the students because you would have seen different batches of students? Do you feel that, let's deal with the local students first, from the student population? Has the, has the profile changed in any way, more in their expectations, in their outlook?

HH: Well I think all of us who have been involved, we really have a special affection for what we call the pioneer batch, the first 300, because they really took a chance on where they were going to university and you know to be quite honest with you, some of them did not have the very best academic credentials, but they just jumped in and worked hard and they saw the university is partly their own creation. It's some students from that batch that, all the reason, we have the fixed tuition plan so when you come in you're going to pay the same amount all the way through. It may change for the next batch but for your batch it's gonna stay the same. That idea came from the very first student government association and so that's a special group and I don't think any group since then has been quite as special as that bunch. I'd say that over time as the schools become larger, the students have become closer to being similar, if you took 200 of them, to say 200 both chosen at random from NUS or NTU, but this still, is still a choice factor there because they choose to come to this particular place and location. I think where we're located frankly has quite a bit to do it. It's easy for those who live at home, it's easy to commute to SMU, much easier than either of the other two major ones. It's something kind of interesting about being in this neighborhood, which I think does attract some students to the area. The law students, ones that I know the best from the last few years are really really good, but the ones that meet from the other school, I would say that there's been more diversification of types within some schools, like social sciences than in other schools.

TSS: There's been some comment, sorry to interrupt, that these students these days tend to identify with the school that they belong to rather than the university

HH: They do, and that's both good and bad, I mean it's natural to identify with a somewhat smaller group that you spend more time with physically than with larger group. At the same time, I think it's important for us to keep trying to work on the notion of an integrated university and all being part of it, the same university. That's a little bit of a problem with the new law school because it seems so, when you look at it, it doesn't look like it's that far away but the street becomes kind of like a river and there's not as much crossing of the street as there would be if the school were connected underground.

TSS: Perhaps when coming in straight is pedestrianized so that that may help. Can I then conclude with about the foreign students' profile, do you see a change in the profile of the foreign students, of course we have a larger pool now.

HH: Yeah, we do have a larger pool, but we could always, I used to tell Tharman back when he was Minister of Education, we talked about foreign students. We could fill up the entire campus with either Indians or Chinese. We have so many who are interested in coming to Singapore, and obviously we can't do that because we're supposed to serve Singapore and then the foreign students, an addition on top of that. I have seen more Southeast Asian students in the last few years than was true, but never very many from Malaysia, a few, but many more from Indonesia and Vietnam, and Myanmar, than was true say ten years ago and I think that's partly outreach and partly interest in Singapore. We still get a large, large number of applicants from India and China and they are seriously very good. In law, we don't have as many in the undergraduate program

because you're gonna become a Singapore lawyer, to translate that back to India requires a few steps, to translate back to China, is much more difficult, because it is a totally different system.

TSS: What advice would you give to the SMU students, as you've been closely associated as president, as a mentor what do you want them to keep in mind, that is short and succinct but you feel that they must never deviate from this mantra.

HH: I think they should take advantage of every opportunity is a university student to broaden their horizons and to see the larger world. Now, that means that it may be more important to go on this law study mission or this business study mission than it is to try to make an A+ on the next exam. That 30 years from now, that learning mission to China or to Europe or to wherever it might be, it's gonna be much more valuable to them than the difference between a B+, an A- on a test. And there's still sometimes this incredible focus on trying to make the best grade in each class and missing sometimes the point of an education, which is to learn more about yourself and the world and how you can employ your knowledge within a larger context.

TSS: Is this typically Singaporean, this over emphasis on grades you think it's typical?

TH: It's not entirely Singaporean but I think Singaporeans like to do many things to do it with more enthusiasm and greater effort than maybe some others.

TSS: Professor Thomas?

HT: I just wanted to ask you one question. I mean and you said that the university had a willingness to take risks. The willingness to take risks, does that I assume that you said from the background of MOE more than anything else or ministers or the chairs, not to say who they are and I'm not asking who they are. But when you think about the risks you've took as a president, what were those risks? It seems to me that the 2006 decision or whatever it was, that was this retreat more or less enshrined the notion of it as really a social sciences university. I mean it maybe have been in people's minds that was this the risk that was really being taken there.

HH: That was a bit of a risk, Howard because I think that a lot of people who had not been so deeply involved in the formation now, I'm gonna, I don't think was a bit of a risk insofar as Tony Tan was concerned or Tharman or for that matter Teo Chee Hean or all the people that were much more knowledgeable but for the larger community, I think there was still a very much a feeling, that this is a business school, it had a few little frills around the edges and for us to define ourselves truly as a Social Sciences University in which business was a critical component, recognizing that business schools developed out of the social sciences, not the other way around. I think was something of a risk within the context of Singapore at that time, but we had a risk-taking chairman, Ho Kwon Ping, who was quite willing to pursue that idea, in fact, maybe off the record, but if you let Kwon Ping just completely on his own, we would be a liberal arts college but with this Graduate Business School. And in fact when NUS started talking about tying up at Yale to do the Yale-NUS College. Ho Kwon Ping said, we already have a liberal arts college in Singapore, it's right here, but that was, that was a clear direction.

Oh, there were a few other risks, we, this is much more on a small-town political level, we made this place a bit of a haven for Filipino maids and for the gay community and

there was a bit of pushback, but if every took a deep breath and then it was okay. These were little things that Bobbie Mariano who was quite active with Filipinos, he was Dean School of Economics, was involved with Philippine Embassy and there was a lot of concern about domestic helpers, understanding their law, understanding their rights and so forth, and so they ran a bunch of little training programs through on the weekends for these Filipino maids. There was a little coughing and choking about that in a few locations but that went fine. And then there was a very interesting development in the student body. You know, we require this community service. Well there's this kid who grew up in Singapore, not super privileged but you know middle class, upper middle class family and somehow or the other for his community service project, he got interested in working with this group that was providing particular health and social services assistance to what you call the freelancers in Geylang and other places, not the women and not ones associated with sort of license and especially with education about HIV and AIDS. I mean this kid just had his eyes completely opened about a world he didn't know existed. And he, through the Students Association started this whole sort of AIDS awareness and HIV awareness kind of program and there was both tut-tutting about that too but then one thing lead to another, But SMU would allow him to do that and put him out in the community like that, which I thought was one of the things we should be doing.

TSS: I guess one of the risks we took also was the self-confidence we had in saying, no we'll award our own degrees. I think there was a very self-confident move to me and also not to have a discounted tuition fees, to say that in fact you have to pay a premium to come to SMU.

HH: That's right. Well they were, we were used in a way to help jack up, yeah, but that's there was some method in that madness too. The idea was to create something of a buy in among students and families in Singapore that the government subsidized education, substantial and still does, but you're expected to put something into it as well, it's not just to a giveaway. Now, we do have a have had from the beginning, aid programs for students from poor families and who do not have the ability to but I think having an ownership interest in the institutions is really important.

TSS: Ownership is important and I think the students felt it, I mean the pioneering team felt it and this is not something that you can replicate unless you're gonna start something new again. I could go on but shall we stop here?

HH: Yeah, thank you very much.

TSS: Thank you, have a nice day.