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### Interview with Tan Chin Tiong: Creating a new management university

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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: Tan Chin Tiong (TCT)

Interviewer: Tan Siok Sun (TSS) & Howard Thomas (HT)

Date: 29 March 2018

Location: SMU Studio, Level 5, Li Ka Shing Library, Singapore

Transcriber: Cheryl Delos Santos & Yeo Pin Pin (SMU Libraries)

TSS: Today is Thursday, 29th of March. I'm in the studio with Professor Tan Chin Tiong, and can I just go ahead with the first question?

TCT: Please do. Yeah.

TSS: You were part of the pioneering team and we had a rather unique legal structure of being a private institution, tertiary institution, that is publicly funded and there were several benefits from this. One of them is in being able to have more flexibility with the salaries of faculty. Can you recall how did that decision about the legal structure come about? Was it discussed? Did it evolve? It was somebody's idea, somebody's brain child?

TCT: If you had gone back even earlier, you know before the start of SMU in year 2000, a group of us came together in year, you know, 1998. And largely this group, we can call them the planning team, and even a year and half before the planning team came together, there was a committee. Well, actually this turned out to be the Council of SIM and SIM was in fact the entity that Tony Tan used to create SMU. So as SMU... SIM has all along been like a 'trick'.

TSS: Open University?

TCT: No, at that point, it wasn't even Open University. They were more like an industry organization with support from EDB, but it is largely a private entity. You know, CEOs, managers come together to create a management association called Singapore Institute of Management and obviously they run programs and largely oversees degree programs and they run seminars. They run exec ed, so it is in itself a very successful private entity, and they have reached a scale whereby I suspect the government reckon maybe it's time to transform SIM into a university. So Tony Tan, then, he was the deputy prime minister. He literally used SIM as the vehicle to start thinking about how to evolve SIM into a private university, because it had always been private, SIM. And the entire council of SIM stepped down, a new group of council put in place and this were mostly business people and Ho Kwon Ping was roped in by Tony Tan to be the chairperson. And the two universities then, NUS and NTU had, were represented by yours truly and Tan Teck Ming from NUS and NTU. So this group of individuals, they became the council members, and we discussed a paper to be submitted to MOE for the creation of the third university. And at that point, a third university which turned out to be SMU, was supposed to evolve from SIM, transform SIM into a private university.

TSS: So was never meant to be a stat board because of your antecedents?

TCT: No, yeah.

TSS: Okay.

TCT: And obviously when the plan was accepted by the government, so proceed, and the planning committee was formed, and there had been a lot of ideas at that juncture. The plan, as a strategy person, the strategy and the plan was totally different from what it turned out to be in year 2000, SMU.

TSS: There were many changes?

TCT: Oh, a lot. And different folks had different ideas of what things ought to be and so on and so forth.

TSS: But it was quite collegiate from what I can understand.

TCT: Oh, yeah yeah. In fact, the original concept as you probably had read from all the archives, you know SIM was supposed to evolve into a university. That was the plan, and NTU's Business School supposed to be adopted as part of the university.

TSS: That didn't happen.

TCT: Well, many things didn't happen. So a group of NTU folks came into the picture, and at that juncture, I was the only rep from NUS and obviously, you know, players changed. You know, Wharton came into the picture. Then the decision was to scale down from a 15,000 size university to 6,000. And we decided, I think it's both, the feeling was pretty mutual. You know SMU decided that we do not, and we do not want to get NTU degree for the first 10 years and it's a little bit like you know the Nanyang Technological Institute. The first 10 years of NTU, it was not a university. It was Institute and students in NTI gotten degrees from NUS. So that was the model that had worked for NTU, before it became university for the first 10 years, students went to NTI got the degrees from NUS. So the government reckoned the same model can be replicated again, that this new entity will receive for the first 10 years, degree from NTU. Then it can evolve into its own university.

TSS: But that didn't came about right?

TCT: Yeah, nothing came about.

TSS: So all this major decision

TCT: But when we incorporated in year 2000, we had already been in the background for two years working on the pieces. So when we actually announced collaboration with Wharton, gotten our first group of students and built the temporary campus. Bang! The University started in year 2000. It was totally different.

TSS: Okay.

TCT: It was a much smaller university and obviously we adopted many things that are different and because we came from SIM, it was private. So all along, Tony Tan wanted us to be outside of MOE. So we were private university for few years. The problem in Singapore is a private university, nobody knows exactly what it is. And that's a problem even when we go overseas, people often look at private universities as a little bit suspicious.

TSS: So those major decisions scaling down from 15,000 to 6,000 surely MOE's approval...

TCT: Oh, don't need. They were all involved, so there's a lot of discussion there's a lot of debate

TSS: But you have also earlier mentioned that it was just a dotted line to MOE because we are a private university.

TCT: Yes.

TSS: Did it occur to you at some point that that MOE was actually taking a backseat or it was possible that...

TCT: It was meant to be... Because Tony Tan...

TSS: Because someone must have told MOE to take a...

TCT: Okay. I think Tony Tan, on several occasions, had also made the remark that university landscape need to change but with the two entities, you know being stuck with its own legacy, it's not easy to change. So he wanted a third university, to be outside of MOE, so that we can play the role of change agent, and this was quoted by him, you know on several occasions. So we became the change agent. So when we are just dotted line not straight line, we pretty much, we're doing things that we think are right and his vision then was we should be a more American-style university. And we did, with the Wharton connection and the relationship, so rightly or wrongly, we pretty much borrowed many things from the US system - Penn.

TSS: And you went, you went to Wharton and you were personally involved in recruitment of some of the key members?

TCT: Yeah

TSS: How did Wharton and American candidates that you might have with viewed first Singapore and then this new university, the third university? Can you recall were they, what was their reaction?

TCT: It was a bit of a commercial relationship. So you have someone advising you what to do and it literally helped us, you know, like you engage a consultant but the good news was you know Janice Bellace was roped in as the first president, so with her relationship at Wharton and Penn, you know, we pretty could have gotten whatever we wanted. You know many of our different colleagues visited the admission office, visited that the finance office, visited the IT office. So wholesale, we kind of like learnt from many aspects of how they do things. And there's nothing wrong with what NTU and NUS were doing. It's just that there are some similarities and a lot of differences. You know like admission, historically in Singapore, it is just based on A level results, and we decided to adopt the American approach, American universities approach, which is a more holistic approach and you look at the CV, look at the grades, you do interview, you get them to write essays, nothing new, it's just that this is exactly what the American universities do.

TSS: It was new for Singapore?

TCT: New for Singapore. So we broke away from a lot of the rules and norms of the Singapore system. And as you know the salary, your question talked about the faculty. The two universities as stat boards were very much linked in with the salary structure of the civil service. So when we were at NUS, as well as at NTU, it's not easy to recruit young faculty or even foreign faculty at the kind of civil service salary. At that point in time, subsequently many things had changed, so we adopted, you know, policies whereby whatever the American system were paying, we pay the same and obviously, it further evolved into you know, every year we engage AACSB to do the top 15 best, you know, public business schools salaries and we pretty much parallel that subsequently. But when we first started, we went to professional conferences, your marketing strategy or whatever and usually that kind of forum is a big mid-market, the schools all go there to recruit. Whatever was, you know, being paid by other good universities, we followed, and obviously the salary then was much higher than for NUS and NTU salary then. And we managed to recruit good people. But nothing stand still, the moment we started offering higher salary, NTU and NUS all followed. So in that sense, it's a change agent whatever we do, they also followed. And as a university, the private university concept worked very well for us, and Tony Tan saw for himself how it actually played, how SMU played the game in Singapore. And three four years later, he decided to transform all the universities in Singapore, then it was just NUS and NTU, into the same private universities model. So, I was with Tony Tan and we visited the American universities and basically checked out the relationship between state and universities, how the reporting system had always been, and what is the relationship, the funding, and so on and so forth. We visited, you know, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, UC Berkeley. We even visited you know, Long Beach in this California State System. So we kind of looked at a few examples, and by then, he and MOE decided all three universities will be private. But calling state universities private is a little strange, so the name changed to state-funded autonomous universities. So all three are on the same level playing field. The moment we became one of three, we no longer have the same, you know, freedom, as what it used to be. So more rules and regulations came into the picture but still it is fine. They largely provided the broad parameters. We still have a lot of latitude to do things. Really it's pretty much a you know a big-budget concept annually. Based on capitation, you get

so much and they build the campus for us, the land is given to us, and so on and so forth. So it's a pretty good deal.

TSS: If you had to rate the city campus, the collaboration with Wharton as an important distinguishing feature or maybe any other factor, what...?

TCT: City campus.

TSS: City campus, okay.

TCT: You know, the ironical thing was, Wharton for us in the academia is a very highly regarded place. You know corporate worlds, some may know Wharton. But when you talk to A-level kids nobody knows Wharton honestly. But the differentiator is, we adopted a more broad-based curriculum, know we adopted a system of things and the pedagogy very different from NUS and NTU, and that was a attraction. There was a gap. There's a group of students who are looking for a different kind of learning experience, educational experience. So whether we had Wharton and not have Wharton, I don't think is a big factor. It's just that we adopted a very different learning experience.

TSS: And on top of that, we were in the heart of the city.

TCT: Yes, we were not in the heart of the city for the first five years, we were in Bukit Timah.

TSS: But it was known that that was temporary.

TCT: Yeah, but kids, the first batch you know pretty much spent four years in Bukit Timah. So it's not a factor. The fact that we are in the city, then we were at Bukit Timah, city campus came later. It's an educational experience closer, probably in this part of the world, closest to the American system that you can get in Singapore. And we further refine it to make it even, I will argue that even more so than Wharton. At Wharton undergraduate program, they still have big lecture theatre, we did not. Every class is a small class and we literally adopted the MBA pedagogy at the undergraduate level. You know, the classroom that we created were all typical MBA classrooms, cases, problem solving, name in front of the students. These are all very business school mainstream MBA, you know, way of doing things we adopted the graduate school of business way of teaching and learning at the undergraduate level. That was a big appeal to a lot of the students.

TSS: But we still didn't have a track record. So I think it is to the credit of the first batch a leap of faith.

TCT: That was exactly my point. So this kind of pedagogy, this kind of learning experience, there were enough kids out there who wanted it. So the first year, we gotten 2,000 applicants and we took in 300. So the ratio was very very very good.

TSS: And also the taking of risk with a four year course, you know what Singaporeans are like...

TCT: Yes plus higher tuition fee, 30% higher, one third higher. Despite all of the above, students came.

TSS: So with all this great planning, is it possible there that could have been one or two anxious moments, could but the pioneering team have asked itself what could go wrong? Is it possible that there were some moments in which you all wondered whether it would take off?

TCT: It's when it's funded by the government, it has to take off. I think the reason why in Singapore is so much easier than many other places is that the government is committed to it. The moment

they start a new university, they fund it, money is on the table. You guys go to work and make it work.

TSS: Which is why you were also quite prepared to leave NUS then?

TCT: Quite honestly if it had been a truly private university, I can only speak for myself, I would not have come. We knew from day one, it is with the government's initiative.

TSS: You must have worked quite closely with Janice Bellace in the early days?

TCT: Yeah.

TSS: Can you recall what were the major issues and challenges that you really have to focus together with her in the early days?

TCT: It's to put in place, it's like a start-up. Everything is, you know, clean slate, you just have to create things but obviously we did not have to reinvent the wheel. Many things are already out there. Many schools, universities are already doing them. So just learn, and adopt the best practices, and put in place. So Janice, as you know came in and out of Singapore. She is not a resident president so we were on the phone a lot, you know, as and when there are issues to discuss, when we picked up the phone and chat and we didn't have WhatsApp then so a lot of long-distance call.

TSS: And and the first board of trustees were were created quite early and you, I've got the names of those on the first board. Some of them remain for a number of years. Can you recall how were committees formed? I mean did you interact particularly with any particular...?

TCT: No. It was a small group, so we were all very close, you know, we work very closely together.

TSS: With the board?

TCT: With the board and we all get involved in all the committees.

TSS: So there's a lot to say about being small.

TCT: Yeah, yeah. It's a lot easier to do things when it's small. You know, the relationship, the bonding, the common mission, you know, all aligned.

TSS: Can I now go towards, talk about the students now? It's been about 17 years since SMU been created. Do you detect any change in student profile or student expectations?

TCT: Well, I think the change is more as you scale up, you know, you will lose some of the way you typically would have recruited the students. When we first started, the first few years literally, for every candidate, you know we have this high school grades, you know the standard exam. We had some of them have SAT, you the first two years we actually use SAT. SAT score, essays, course interview scores and we literally kind of look at all of the above before we decide on the students. As you evolve into a big university, and you kind of like have different cut off, to take in the first chunk of kids, then you select within the subset. So a lot of the process have changed because of scale. And obviously the Ministry of Education has also evolved the discretionary admission at NUS and NTU and other the other universities. 10% of the students can based on talent outside of, you know, the classroom. So again the other universities also have similar thing. But for us, we still like to think that, we kind of like look at this entire portfolio of the students before we decide, but grades evolved into increasingly a major factor.

TSS: Now?

TCT: Yes

- TSS: But in terms of students expectations, are they as idealistic as you found them?
- TCT: It was hard to get in, it's still is very hard to get in, if not even worse. I mean like at the business school, it's probably one in eight or something or one in ten. So when we first started, it was one in six. So despite the fact that it became a bigger university, it is still very very challenging to get admitted into SMU, and I think things became to settle down. You know, for the first few years, people some of the parents would be looking at us, as can the kids get jobs but when the first batch came out, all of them got jobs and higher salary than the other two universities. The rest is history. Singapore parents are very pragmatic, you go to school, you get good salary, that's is it.
- TSS: They will sing your praises. Also, I think a lot of parents have said that there's a big change in their children.
- TCT: Yes, the process, the process transformed them and it's not just the pedagogy. It is also we push them to do CCA. One of the things about getting good jobs is that you have to make sure after four years, you have a good looking CV. By doing a lot of CCAs, getting involved they built up their CV and all these pieces are all kind of carefully thought through. And you need to do social voluntary service, you need to go overseas, you need to do internship. It's mandatory and most of our kids do multiple of that, get involved in, you know, leadership role, so after four years of this and in a classroom they were forced to speak. So they became a more confident individual, a more holistic individual, and these are the kind of people that will get good jobs.
- TSS: Moving to the business school, you have been associated with the business school. Was it apparent to you right from the beginning that it wouldn't, it would start with the business school but there would be other schools from day one?
- TCT: From day one, the six schools were all put in place.
- TSS: Including law?
- TCT: Yes, from day one.
- TSS: So it's a question of staggering?
- TCT: Yeah, so we pretty much built one school every year, for the first six years, so that was all in the plan. You know because if you look at a management university, all the disciplines around business, you know, would be, you know, your social sciences, as foundation of business, law is very crucial, you know, in the business system and environment, and information system, at many places is part of the business school, MIS you would call it management information system. So if you look at say Wharton, it has economic department, it has a law department, it has the MIS department. So all our schools, at many big universities business school, they all have them. So we are in some sense, you know a bigger business school at the universities' level. Social science I would argue, your sociology or psychology, political science, these are the foundation of people-to-people dealings, the foundations of business.
- TSS: And looking at the curricula of the business school now, should it be adding some missing parts?
- TCT: Well, when we first started, we have a lot more general education, because that's what distinct about American system. If you look at UC-Berkeley, first two years is general education, the next two years is business. You know we had a lot more general education component but over the years, they kind of drop off, different schools wanting to have their own specialization, get included more of it. So, but it's okay. You know we all evolve, but many of our business subjects are also very close to general education.



TSS: Do you want to ask anything?

HT: I wonder if if you know what you just said, you know the new factors become slightly specialized now?

TCT: Yes.

HT: So the general education component that I inherited, that I remember in 2009 was probably 40% of the whole thing. Now it's somewhat less than that.

TCT: Yeah, I think so. Again I am not so familiar with that.

HT: But now let's just take that as the proposition, without saying what some what then, does this mean that then what we've done is reverted to highly specialized degrees and gone away from the concept of general education?

TCT: We are still a lot more, you know, liberal arts, general education driven than the other local universities.

HT: But that's because it's a three year degree not a four year degree.

TCT: That's one aspect, the other aspect too was that we deliberately put in. If you look at our law degree, when we first started we wanted 50% general education, 50% law, while the ministry didn't agreed to that. So, we settled at 70% law, 30% general education. NUS is almost close to 100% law.

HT: Yeah isn't that because in part NUS and NTU was sort of modelled on Britain and...

TCT: Yeah, that was exactly the point that Tony Tan made. That we need to move away from this highly specialized university education, you know, to a more general, a holistic education. And his argument was that, jobs are coming out of intersections of discipline. You don't even know where they were coming from. So someone who is more generally trained, are more likely to adapt to the new jobs that are cross-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary.

HT: So who came up with the idea of a T-shaped model?

TCT: Academics, some educational specialists. I don't know.

HT: I mean but when I first came here, somebody said we're a T-shaped institution.

TCT: Yes, yes but T-shaped had been argued and documented in many places, not just at SMU, outside too. Yeah, make sense, while you have a broad base, you specialize. And some would argue that moving forward with this digital world, and you need to have that degree of specialization in order to be able to function in a job environment. So you need both.

HT: Could I, could I just ask one more question. Could I go back to one of the comments you made earlier on which I was very fascinated about, which is when Siok Sun asked you about was the plan always to have six schools. And I'm now, I remember when I first came here, I wasn't entirely sure that that was the case.

TCT: It was, yeah.

HT: But you know, I mean you know the sales job you and Woody and Raj pushed on me, was you know the business school, it's sort of the anchor.

TCT: It still is, it still is the larger school. You know, you're looking at at least one third of the students from business.

- HT: Sure, but you know in the literature, I know no one will remember who said it but somebody said the model is the LSE of the East, is that Tony Tan?
- TCT: Well, the London School of Economics had been used, the University of London have been used actually because they're both in the city and I think the whole social social science university notion largely was Arnoud's concept coming from the European model, you know, a lot of universities are social science universities.
- HT: Yeah.
- TCT: If you look at what is increasingly more evident, is moving forward, you need to be more technology driven too. So I think we probably are, you know, kind of like at an intersection of three clusters: the technology, you know, your social science, and your business management.
- TSS: Would there be a seventh school?
- TCT: No.
- TSS: This is, it you...
- TCT: You know, information system is the technology piece, and if you look at the digital world, you know your big data, your analytics, your Internet of Things, these are all stuff that the IT schools are doing. We don't have biology, we don't have humanities, we don't have a medical school. So there are still a lot of pieces missing, but I think all along, our board had always been wanted a more focused or more specialized university. So, in one of the question, is are there missing pieces. If at all there is a piece that can fit in, I would argue, humanities, and it is increasingly important, the arts and culture part, you know, of education. And whether we will evolve yet one more school in the area, I don't know, and it's a function of how things evolve.
- TSS: Looking at SMU, at this stage of its development, do you think we can maintain this slightly different kind of education system, or are we going to look more and more like NUS and NTU and start to lose?
- TCT: The other way around, they are starting to look more like us, not we're looking more like them, the other way around, which means that we have to move forward. We have to leap frog so that they will have more things to catch up on. SMU-X is one of those initiative, that I personally think is the major move for SMU. And if you look at a lot of business schools, you know, we use cases, cases it was largely analysing and studying history. SMU-X is bringing us into the future. You are looking at existing problems and issues and address them, and that's pretty cool. So if we make SMU-X into a major chunk of our curriculum, which also means problem-solving of real-world problems become important, that would be pretty cool. That would be a lot harder for NUS and NTU, and big universities to catch up on. Of course medical schools always live people they do surgery on, there's no difference from the industry-based problems that we need to focus on.
- TSS: What advice would you give a potential undergrad who's coming to join SMU and has for four years ahead of him, what what advice would you give them to make sure they...?
- TCT: Maximize their time, do as much things as possible, learn as much as possible, the best four years of their life.
- TSS: You don't think that too many distractions?
- TCT: No, those distractions are good. Do them, this is four years, that this period of their life whereby they can go out and do new things, go overseas.

TSS: Are they taking the challenge?

TCT: Many of them do, many of our graduates, multiple internships, multiple overseas things, multiple social service engagement.

TSS: Is this...

TCT: These are the kids that get the best jobs.

TSS: Is this objective reiterated by faculty, by the President, by the Provost?

TCT: I'm sure, I'm sure you do. I think we all sing the same song. Do we? Oh I think so.

HT: Well, I think probably the people who are in leadership role, probably do.

TCT: I think we're pretty aligned on some of this.

TSS: And...

TCT: We say it differently.

TSS: Of course. And in terms of alumni you think we have done sufficient to get back these people, they will all be you know, some of them 10 years.

TCT: Increasingly so, for the first period, we are not that aggressive. I think the last few years, we have gotten a lot more aggressive. So we now are engaging them on a more regular, frequent basis and part of the initiative of this International Advisory Council. Once a year, we will do a conference, on the ground, you know, in each of the countries, you know with a group of business people, we invite the business community, we invite alumni as a networking forum that is also part of the agenda of allowing alums of SMU, who happen to be in the respective countries or foreign graduates of SMU, all opportunity to rebond again.

TSS: But do the students have some sense that they are part of a Bras Basah community, a kind of a village?

TCT: Well the early batches, if they had not spend enough time here, no. But it's okay, we are University. The affiliation is not with Bras Basah but with the university, like we did in Myanmar. You know, the International Advisory Council launch and we did a dialogue session, which is, you know, some lectures some panel discussion, 50 alums came and this were all Burmese graduates from SMU. They are all working in family businesses or located in Myanmar, they all came, plus another hundred local business people. So, is it amazing forum for them to network. So we are doing this in six countries: Vietnam, Philippines, Indonesia, China, Thailand. So again, this is, again, bringing all our alums, on the ground, back to reconnect with SMU.

TSS: That is a unique concept.

TCT: So there are new initiatives, new things that we are all doing.

TSS: Sounds very encouraging. Is there something you want to say that has not been covered by me so far any advice any reflection on, did we miss doing something?

TCT: I'm sure along the way we, you know, we made mistakes, but the good news is that we are small enough, flexible enough to change and we move on. I'm sure, you know, the future and, I'm an optimist, you know, a lot of people are a bit fearful of the future whether universities still gonna be in existence. I think universities has a role to play. I would look at, nobody will argue that you need primary school, you need secondary schools but a lot of people are questioning – do we need universities? Can you go get a job after secondary school, be a start-up? You know,

like Bill Gates and some of those good folks who are very very wealthy but don't didn't go to the universities. I will argue that the four years in universities is like primary school, secondary school. You need that four years, to find yourself, to become a learner, to get your character and personality, and your network mould into shape, to become a good human being. So it's a necessary part, so I think the fact that, as four years of higher education is something that every human being should have. Do we need universities? The answer is yes. Can you learn skills from a non-university's environment? Of course, but universities is not just learning skills, skills get updated in three years, get outdated in three years. So you need to upgrade all the time, but this opportunity to bond, to learn yourself, once in your life.

HT: Can I ask a question?

TCT: Sure.

HT: You served as Provost for Janice, Ron Frank and Woody.

TCT: Yes

HT: So you served through three...

TCT: And now I'm working very closely with Arnoud.

HT: Well that I know, I was not, I was not gonna ask that one, so you've had, you know, I have two questions. One why do you think you were picked as Provost in the first place and secondly what have you learned from being Provost across three different presidents?

TCT: Well, you know, I happened to be there, you know, I don't think I'm better than any anybody else. I happened to be there. I was in the committee and why and how NUS put me in a committee, I have no idea but I was in a community that was chaired by KP, and after the government accepted the proposal, Kwon Ping said why don't you come over, and that's it.

TSS: As to his other question about you know...

TCT: The three presidents are very different. You know, Janice, that period, largely like I said, she's not a residential president. So a lot of times you know, we kind of like very regularly speak on the phone and we make decisions collectively. And when Ron Frank came from the business school, so at the early stage business school was a very important piece. And again we work pretty much as a team. And the interesting thing was that you know for a president coming from the US, it would be a lot harder for him, or even Janice to perform fundraising role, which is typically what the university's president is supposed to do. But I happen to be a local person. So as the Provost, I'm not supposed to do fundraising, but I did a lot of it. So we kind of collaborate on things. It became like two-in-one and with Woody it was the same, and that worked out fine. They are very different human beings, we have different interests, but we worked as a team.

HT: So did they all shared the same vision?

TCT: Yeah

HT: And whose vision was that?

TCT: University's vision.

HT: Can you define that, was that Tony Tan?

TCT: The board, the board, pretty involved board. We have a very active and involved board. Many of the broad parameters were all decided at the board level. Just to give you an example, we

could have gotten the liberal arts college, but at that point in time when Singapore government wanted a liberal arts college, our board wasn't interested. Again, the whole notion of, be focused.

HT: So you're talking about the Yale-NUS concept?

TCT: Yeah. If it had gone to, if that whole initiative had come to SMU, it will probably evolve in a different way, again the same mission, but it will evolve in a very different way, because MOE reckoned the liberal arts is a logical fit for SMU.

TSS: Of all the responsibilities of a Provost, what do you think is you would pinpoint and say is really critical, in your assessment? A Provost has to do many many things. This is the academic head of the university, but what aspect do you think, this is it managing people it's is it the curricular?

TCT: No, it's mostly working with the deans, working with the rest of the senior management. You know Provost role is very unusual, in that the Dean supposed to drive the school. So, again the Provost has to work very closely with the Dean to make sure the school is in place. So it's a little bit like a mentor. You know working closely with each of the school, the leader of the school is the Dean. The Dean is supposed to kind of make sure all the pieces are working right and so the Provost role is a little bit like a supervisory role, looking after the deans, to make sure all the things are done.

TSS: Who does the performance appraisals of the deans?

TCT: The Provost.

TSS: Okay I remember Paul Evans said that the job of a Provost is a very difficult job, would you agree?

TCT: Yeah.

TSS: It's its...

TCT: It is very complex. Basically, you're looking at schools, faculty, the academic piece, the student piece. These are all pretty complicated matters. So the Provost as chief academic officer, oversees all of the above, and you're dealing with a lot of things. For large universities, it's probably many times worse than SMU. We are much smaller.

HT: No, maybe I would allow myself one question which is to repeat Siok Sun's question, which is, did you look to the future?

TCT: Yeah.

HT: I mean you must have had a future-oriented view as a provost through three presidents and now working so closely with Arnoud. As you look to the future, I mean you know what do you think the vision might be and if you wrote a scenario that you think is the most likely one, I mean you've already said to me nothing's gonna fail here in Singapore cause it's government money behind it. I think it's probably a very accurate proposition so what you say is the most..

TCT: I think one of the biggest challenge for us is, how can we differentiate ourselves from the Western universities or other universities out there. And if you look today, the top universities, well again, based on whatever ranking you want, tend to be mostly American universities. And the question is do you want to compete with, you know, your Stanford, your Harvard, your Yale? Answer is no, we need to be uniquely, you know, Asia, I think our, you know, our perspectives should be, you know, we are here and we ought to know Asia, that would make

us a very different university. What that means, is that we need to push our faculty, we need to push our students and we need to push them out and we need to organize ourselves to the degree whereby people want to learn Asia, they come to us.

HT: We need a stronger profile in the region?

TCT: Sure, correct that is exactly why the International Advisory Council is put in place, outreach to the region, regularly do conferences in different parts of Asia.

HT: Who is directing that?

TCT: The Chairman, the President and yours truly. I chaired the working committee, yeah, which is something that I believe in.

HT: Without that, do you know, it's obviously a marketing professor talking when you say about differentiation, I mean you know I think it's that

TCT: It's no, strategy professor says the same thing.

HT: Well, you know we have different words, but you know when you when you think about universities as a whole, I mean, you're talking about do I want to look like an American university, well you know, do I want to look like Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, you know, I mean you know, you've answered that by saying what do you want to be it sounds to me like one of the best Asian universities.

TCT: Yes.

HT: The first choice of Asian universities.

TCT: Yeah.

HT: But earlier on, you said one of the differentiating features, which to use your own words, you said "cool".

TCT: Yes cool. Yeah, yeah.

HT: You use cool quite a lot. Yeah, you know but... Was SMU-X.

TCT: Yeah

HT: Now that's interesting, isn't it?

TCT: Yep.

HT: Actually, I think it's very interesting.

TCT: Are we likely to get issues and problems from US and from London to study on, to work on? Likelihood? Low. Can we get Asian problems to work on? Likelihood, high.

HT: Yes.

TCT: And all this international academic, you know, the advisory councils, all the members are volunteering, giving us, say come to my companies, you know, we will give you problems to solve.

HT: Yeah I think that's probably a real differentiation.

TCT: Yes

HT: I remember when I was Dean, you know, in Warwick Business College, chair the association of business schools in the UK, and we used to have these conferences at the Hilton, we used to, you know, invite exactly the people you're talking about, you know, about projects and all the rest of it. The co-production of knowledge between those two people, they loved the lunch but nothing really happened. If you, so what you're saying is, the differentiation is much more likely than cooperation?

TCT: Yep, we have 50 advisory councils from the region. Now, this is just stage one, and all of them are eager to have our faculty and students work on their company's problems. We need to execute them, to translate them into things that will benefit us.

HT: So alongside, your Asianess, there is really SMU-X

TCT: Well, SMU-X is a piece of it.

TSS: Well, thank you professor

TCT: Thank you so much.