

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Oral History Collection

University Heritage

---

28-2-2018

### Interview with Ho Kwong Ping: Creating a new management university

Kwon Ping HO

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/smu\\_oh](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/smu_oh)



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

HO, Kwon Ping. Interview with Ho Kwong Ping: Creating a new management university. (2018). 1-15.  
Available at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/smu\\_oh/48](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/smu_oh/48)

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the University Heritage at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Collection by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylids@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylids@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: Ho Kwon Ping (HKP)

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

Date: 28 February 2018

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

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

TSS: Ok ready. Today is 26th February 2018 we are in the recording studio with Chairman Mr. Ho Kwon Ping and Professor Howard Davis will drop by soon... We are here for Professor Howard's

HKP: Professor Howard Thomas

TSS: Professor Howard Thomas book, forthcoming book, SMU strategic decisions between 1998 to 2018. Chairman, if I could take you back to the genesis of SMU and since the book covers 1998, 20 years to 2018 and I think the major strategic decisions as to the shape of SMU were made in 96, 97, 98. It appeared that SMU that we saw the basic skeleton at SMU in 2000 when we had our first intake of students evolved because along the way first we was supposed to be part of SIM, then we're not part of SIM. We're supposed to be NTU and NUS business schools was supposed to be, students are supposed to be sent to SMU, that didn't happen. We were supposed to be 15,000 strong and we cut down to 6,000 etc. So it was like an evolution, it wasn't like somebody right at the top saying SMU will be ABCD. It was wide parameters were given; there will be a third university, it should be different, perhaps you collaborate with a foreign university. But then things evolved and yourself, Dr Tony Tan and the pioneering team were part of the evolution. Perhaps that could account for the strength of SMU, the fact that it wasn't predetermined that the University will look like this in 1996, in 1997 but things were thought through, research was done. There could have been discussions and even arguments and what we saw as SMU in 2000, was a result of this rather evolutionary process. Am I right?

HKP: Yes, it's a long drawn-out yes. Yes, it's an evolution, but I think it's a lot messier than you make it out to be. In retrospect, I would have liked to say, it was all carefully thought out, very modulated debates and discussion, but in reality, as with any startup, there's quite a lot of ad hoc, haphazard, sort of wing it as you go along, that I think is probably could be called some kind of managed creative chaos and quite honestly I think that's probably in my own experience with startups with Banyan Tree or with SMU. I think it's a very important part of any startup process, that there be a very creative mix between the freedom of coming up with all kinds of brainstorming crazy ideas, going forwards, going backwards, going sideways and then eventually, when you get the sense that it all comes together and make sense, then you go out with it. Whether you go out with an Apple iPhone or you go out with a university, it's that same process of making sure that you've deliberated on everything possible and you do not have a fixed model at the very beginning. So that you get what you refer to, a certain amount of strength, which comes out of having really deliberated probably everything and very importantly you also get a very strong sense of ownership by all the parties involved. SMU started very small, but SMU started with all the pioneering people sharing the same vision because we all spend time debating things until, until we were all marching voluntarily in unison, and I stress voluntarily. So, so yes it was clearly an evolution but there were all kinds of, we went into all kinds of directions, as you've just summarized yourself.

TSS: But actually that evolution process was quite short, it was quite speedy, it's about two years actually and there was a lot of focus.

HKP: In the very beginning, well I've actually said it before that I think one of the reasons for its success was the whole process. Dr Tan made sure, I said it before so I guess he can use it if you wish to, he won't mind it now. MOE was never involved in the process. It was him and me and I think he is a master at, he is a master strategist, because essentially at that time he, in my view he had a mission regarding the tertiary sector in Singapore. And as you know he was a VC for time in NUS and I think he realized that the two of them were like very large crude carriers, the LCCs that you can't turn easily. So part of the reason of setting up SMU was to

perhaps try to create a model that would pose through its own existence, a challenge to the other universities and prompt them to make changes. Whereas making changes by fiat, it's not gonna work. Managing a university is like herding cats, they go everywhere where they want to, you can't order them to do anything. So I think that was in the beginning one of his ideas and that's probably one of the reasons why of all things of, I've always wondered why would he choose me, the most unlikely person to even have a decent respect for universities. I didn't have a very great respect for universities. So in a way we started out being slightly, I wouldn't say with rebellious but clearly, the mandate from him for me was to do something different. And I think he recognized that if the whole process had to involve every level of MOE, it probably wouldn't work. Although we did involve people, Tharman was a deputy secretary at a time and was on the board when we were still conceptualizing it. Swee Keat was involved too, so everybody was involved but he kept pretty good control and he and I discussed a lot of things and I think one of the great things that he did was, and it's probably part of his style that when you entrust you to something and then you convince him of what you want to do, you just go into it. So we went in all kinds of directions. There was a discussion at cabinet which I'm not privy to, about how SMU should essentially aggregate all the business schools and then they realized that that wasn't going to work. I was parachuted into SIM to be the chairman and to use SIM as a vehicle, which with my first board. We looked at it quite seriously and then we concluded, it wouldn't work so we gave a report back that it wouldn't work. So all that happened in a very short period of time, papers and papers had been written, John Yip had to write some of these. But then finally it sort of came together as to the basic shape of SMU, so that was I think one major decision. The next one would be what model do you want to have, meaning the first basic decision was that it was just going to be a small management university with 6,000 undergraduates, because it was not even necessarily the case as you know, it was all kinds of shapes. After that was decided on, and that NUS and NTU would keep their business schools and we would have our business school and a few other schools. The question then arose as to what model, then we started thinking, and start looking all over before we finalized on the Wharton model. And then after that so there's a whole series of, in my view turning points and milestones which were truly strategic decisions as opposed to tactical ones or academic decisions about which faculty to have and not to have.

TSS: But there must have been major decisions that Dr Tan would have to revert to cabinet? Or get kept like being able to have the campus in the city, for example or even cutting down from 15,000 being a comprehensive university to being a niche university. Was that's something that was part of his responsibilities and you left it to him to get cabinet approval?

HKP: No, it's

TSS: Or you think it was all within his ambit as the minister in charge of education

HKP: No, I wouldn't know, as they like to say it's kind of beyond my pay grade as to what they discuss in cabinet. But what I can say is that, we were never landed with surprises, so it would be always agreed between ourselves, and then. Or put it the other way, everything that I agreed to with him, he could keep it, he said it with full authority, as to whether he got permission afterwards or beforehand from cabinet, I wouldn't know. But I, for example a city university, we discussed it and there was at one time a discussion that we would be in, the whole issue but the city universe is also quite interesting. We were being considered one time for Tampines. There was a site available and it's always part of another, sort of, you know these urban legends about how we got this university city campus, was because we went to Lim Hng Kiang and proposed that we be given the site for Marina Bay Sands. Knowing that it

is a multi-trillion-dollar site and true to form he said “get outta here, you! You know this is ridiculous. I'm not gonna give you a trillion-dollar site”. So we said, well then Minister you're gonna give us something, how about this horrible little site in the city. It's not worth anything because you can't build anything on it, it's all fractured, so why don't you give that to us. And of course, I'm sure he already knew that, URA was already in favor of it and so he was in favor of it but we had to go through the pretence that we didn't really want the city campus. We really wanted a different one. Because people don't ever want to give you what you ask for.

TSS: I was going to ask you, Chairman, that would SMU still succeed if the government had taken a kind of a back step? But it looks like a lot of things were decided between you and Tony Tan.

HKP: I think so.

TSS: So, would I say that in the beginning you would at least meet or speak with Dr Tan once a week, twice a week.

HKP: It was quite regular and he's the kind of person that you fly past him, the big, he's not a micro manager at all. You have to, I don't know how to put it, I mean there were so many decisions that were unusual, and the choice of the first president. We were getting all kinds of signals as to who it should be, a very traditional choice. And I actually put it to him, can we have Janice Bellace, who is a woman, an American and part-time, because her father was ill, she would just fly in and fly out. And he was quite sceptical, then he said if you guys really wanted it and we said yes we really wanted it, because we want to be different. He said, go for it. So I think along the way, there's a lot of give-and-take, but it wasn't a process by which key decisions like this, it wasn't as if there were lots of papers written. It was my trying to convince him.

[Sorry about that, I'll turn it off, I'm sorry, hello hi Claire, I'm in a recording session right now with Siok Sun, can I call you back I'll call you back thanks bye. Sorry record that for posterity. I turn it off to at least to silent.]

I think in retrospect from what I read of the pioneer generation and from my father's dealing with Goh Keng Swee and others. The dealings I had with Tony Tan for SMU were probably quite similar to those days, right. You can imagine Lim Kim San being asked by Lee Kuan Yew to start up HDB, I doubt there would be an endless papers written, I would have thought them Lim Kim San, being a businessman would have said to Lee Kuan Yew, what are my marching orders, create housing for 50,000 people, blah blah blah. You go and do it and do it any way you want to. So of course we were a generation later, so the freedom of manoeuvring was a lot less, but clearly, it was a mode of development which had its philosophical roots in the same way, meaning I come to you, do we share the same philosophy? Are you the kind of person who when you understand what I want you to do, can you just run with it or do you have to run back to me every time? Are you comfortable making decisions of your own without having to, you know, get approval for everything? So there was an understanding. So the case of first president, we were given some names, I went back and I said we really want to try with this person and he said go for it. Now, if we failed, it'd be a different matter. So all along the way there were many such decisions, many, where we had the latitude, our I mean, I remember very well two of the major, I'm jumping ahead, but there's two other major decisions that were clearly strategic and were left to us to decide and they were in fact decisions which ran counter to the recommendation.

TSS: Are you at liberty?

HKP: Yes, yes! I've actually said this in other interviews. One was about the tuition fees and the other one was about conferment of degrees. After we had tied up with Wharton, there was considerable concern, among various parties, that we should do a double degree or joint degree with Wharton. And quite a bit of debate that we should go to Wharton and say can you give us a Wharton-SMU degree? We rejected it, because many of us from the private sector including myself had said that we have a basic philosophy, which actually I also derived from my experience with Banyan Tree, and that is if you ever try to start up something piggybacking on somebody else, trying to get off that piggyback is going to be very difficult, just bite the bullet and start with what you have. So we actually said no, we will confer our own degree. This is a time when parents were extremely wary about SMU. There was concern that this was going to be the second-class university people who couldn't go to NUS and NTU would come to us, but we said that was a safe way of doing it and we've completely rejected the safe way and we went to Tony Tan, not to the ministry with endless papers, we said no we want to do it this way, and you know. He questioned and said are you sure, blah blah blah. We said yes, we sure we want to do it this way. Then he said go ahead. If we failed then we would have been gotten into trouble. So everywhere along the way, this is.. this is.. this is test and a build up of confidence over time that when you promise to do something you'll get it done. And I think that's how the first generation did it. Tuition fees, big debate, again we are second-class university, coming from behind why don't we charge a 10% discount? And we had said if you want from the very beginning to establish yourself as a premium university, knowing that Singaporeans are very *kiasu* and they go to a supermarket, they'll buy the toothpaste which is ten cents more expensive because it's good. We said no, if we really want to establish ourselves, price yourself at a ten percent premium. So with our own, so those are two very, we could have gone the other way completely and be completely dependent on Wharton or we could have charged a bigger discount. To me those are very important strategic decisions, which are not of an academic nature in terms of you know the curriculum content and so on. But clearly, were important milestones in SMU's development and which Dr Tan fully supported.

TSS: Considering the fact that yet one more generation change has happened and we see another four more universities after SMU. Would it be correct to say that perhaps for the subsequent universities, MOE had a greater say and therefore the universities may have lesser flexibility? Because Singapore government and civil service has also evolved and become more structured.

HKP: What I know of the creation of SUTD, SUSS, SIM and well okay I was involved in all of them, I was involved, SIT I was not involved in. I only had hearsay and so on being in the academic circles but SIM, I was chairman of SIM concurrently as SMU came into life. I came out of it but the recent decision to make into SUSS, I'm not involved in but I was very much involved in creating the Open University, etc. But I was I was on the committee for the fourth University, the committee that came out with Yale NUS and SUTD. There was a long committee, there was a big committee with a lot of papers, but at the end of the day, it was Dr Tony Tan's vision that prevailed. As to how they're being run now, I have no idea as to whether they are more under MOE than others, bear in mind that all of us became autonomous universities. We were at one time, the only autonomous university and therefore, precluded from invitation at any state event. The early presidents and myself would never be invited to National Day because we were private. Until NUS and NTU and all of us became the same then all of us were invited. So, very protocol-conscious society we have in Singapore. But now, we're all the same, we're

all autonomous universities. So I don't know whether they're more constrained than others. I have no idea that at all, to the extent that they're newer, perhaps, I can't really comment.

TSS: If we could go back a little bit even earlier in time, I remember Lee Kuan Yew and a few other people are in early 90's, commenting that ... or people have commented about Singapore lacking entrepreneurs, remember? Yeah sort of, we produced very good civil servants but very few businessmen to do startups, heading their own corporations, etc. That could have accounted for this third University focusing on business and management but from what I could read, it would appear that it wasn't just a SMU wasn't meant to be a business school per se, it was business / management plus plus. That there would be other disciplines which are related to business like economics, accounting, law. So in a way it was not just a business school, it was meant right from the beginning to be business plus plus.

HKP: But that was from us. You know, what's interesting is, if you go and interview, I'm sure you've interviewed Dr Tan. I'm not sure what background he can give to it, all we knew was that at one time, there was even the discussion and I don't know how much of it is true, that cabinet was talking about setting up a business school. One single business school so that the other two universities could focus more on engineering. There was a discussion that they were not enough engineers in Singapore and I don't know how the setting up of a SMU would have encouraged more engineering, so that's all beyond my level of involvement. What I do know is that we were never told that it was going to be a School of Economics or Business School or even Social Sciences School. The name SMU came from us, internally, including the Chinese name which we purposely took to be, what was a *xin da* because they were *guo da* so we wanted to be even higher than them, so we chose Singapore University. It was quite naughty of us. But we actually decided in the very beginning, we wanted to be, we came up with the vision that we wanted to be a social sciences university and we wanted to be an LSE of the East, so to speak. And we wanted to have, in the very beginning, what faculties we were going to have. So that, the idea of having the School of Systems Science, the School of Economics, all that was at the very beginning and it was not shaped by MOE, it was shaped by us and they approved it. So, so a large part of it of the ownership, the sense of ownership by SMU is because the people who were there at the creation, so to speak actually felt that they could decide what they wanted to do. And if you convinced Tony Tan on it he would just say go and you didn't have endless papers, but we didn't have a lot of, that's where you probably can't find, you can't find all these working papers, going back as you could if you were you know the normal Singapore system, there'd be tons of working papers about the different shape of the school, none of this evidence exists because it was just being discussed by a bunch of people and then I will go to Tony Tan and say is that okay sir? And he'd say okay. And then we'll go back and we start it. We don't have a lot of papers and I think that's something true for and I'm not sure it's about entrepreneurs, look at Goh Keng Swee, he's not particularly an entrepreneur as such, look at all the things that he started, from you know from the zoo to Symphony Orchestra. I think people who start things up, have a greater sense of ownership and empowerment. And clearly that's one of the part of the culture of SMU that, as chairman I'd like to continue. I don't have that much impact on the specific academic curriculum but I've always emphasized a sense of empowerment that we shape our own future, within, of course, within norms, but we always try to shape our own future and I think people have seen SMU-X or this or that. This is our future, we got to get approval from the people who fund us, we got to convince them, we get their buy-in, but this is our university. That culture was there at the very, very beginning and I think, as a small aside, if you're talking about strategic decisions, I think strategic decisions don't just involve concrete specific things like tuition fees and names

and this and that or even numbers of faculty, very, very important in the life of a startup whether it be tech or university, are the people's determination of what they want the culture of the university to be? or the culture of the institution to be? That's a very important strategic decision, what culture do you want? And then you have to continually shape it, continually, even now.

TSS: And reinforce it.

HKP: We have to continually reinforce that.

TSS: Our students have done us proud. I mean quite a number have set up sandwich bar and some start-ups but a lot of going to be salaried and working in the financial industry. I was just thinking, maybe it would be a very interesting thing to track the first batch the first batch that graduated in 2004, not too many of them and by now they would be coming to 40 years old. You were an entrepreneur, but even before you were 40 years old, so I think it's a good thing that we should follow up and just track what have they done and how many have really had successful startups or become businessmen then.

HKP: I actually track, I mean by nature of them being the first pioneer back, so I'm closer to them the smaller number, so I keep in touch with quite a number of them. I only have two points to make when you talk about entrepreneurs and so on. The first point is, I don't think an entrepreneur is to be valued any higher than a person with a different calling. I don't want to over romanticize the idea that if you're a salaried person, you are somehow from a lower moral order than an entrepreneur. I think anyone who has found purpose, and has been able to excel in his or her chosen field, is a person who's in my view, has achieved a lot and has achieved purpose. So entrepreneurship and being an entrepreneur is just what some want to do, others may not want to, that's up to them. So I don't and I try to, clearly try to play down the importance of entrepreneurship, even as we talk about it in Singapore because, you don't have, a society made up of only entrepreneurs, is like a society made up of only leaders. You need leaders, you need followers. If everybody was a damn entrepreneur, my god! Then who's gonna be the employees for the entrepreneurs? So it's for some but not for all. The second point is, I think many successful entrepreneurs do not start out as startup, that's another over romanticized notion, quite a number of them work in multinationals and at the age of 40 or even older, they come out of on their own. They even sometimes get the multinational to support them and they start a business. The whole electronics subcontracting sector in Singapore was built up like Venture Corp. and others were built up by HP engineers who worked there for 10 years. And when you want to be an entrepreneur, you actually don't want to romanticize risk-taking because you taking so much risk already, you want to de-risk what you're doing. So they'll usually go out and find three or four other colleagues, one strong in this field, that field, they have contacts, even go to people that they know and companies that they know to get contracts beforehand and then they go out. And the chances of success for these mid-level companies coming out of multinationals actually I think it was a lot a richer to show that the success rate is much higher than the romantic startups by university students. So I always caution our young graduates that, hey if you want to do a startup, that's fine but if you don't want to and you want to work at a multinational and then later on come out and do your own thing that's fine too, and if you never want to leave a multinational but you aspire to be the CEO that's fine too, but always tell them, have big ambitions, that's the only thing I always tell young people. If you don't have big ambitions, if you don't a big ambitions when you're 25, then what kind of ambitions will you have when you're 60. It'd be horrible.



TSS: Ambition and discipline, I guess.

HKP: Yep.

TSS: Moving on, you once mentioned that the fact that three to four hundred Singaporeans enrolled in SMU, the first batch, the students were ready, the system was at fault ok the students were ready for something different, and we are different and I hope we will still continue to be different but what are millennials looking for these days? What are they clamouring for?

HKP: They say you asked me I asked who I'm not a millennial.

TSS: Your son is, your sons are. Because I think that's yes everybody's trying to understand what millennials are looking for, but that's important you are an educator, in more ways than you will admit.

HKP: My view yeah, but my view is as a father as a parent and as a quasi-educator is that people are never that different. I think millennials manifest their aspirations, their disappointments their frustrations in different ways than we do in our generation. Fundamentally, they're all the same and I think, that's why you often find in society grandfathers and grandchildren actually communicate very well, because across all that space and time in terms of technology and changing fashions, regarding anything, they're changing fashions, on music, food, politics and so on, people don't change. So I think, what millennials want is what we've always wanted but it's expressed differently. I think all of us value authenticity, we value integrity, we value purpose. It's just that in the old days, purpose in employment was to be a good salary man, to aspire to be a CEO. Purpose is now found differently today, by working on your own, to be a sort of digital nomad, but the aspiration to find some kind of purpose in life, no different from my grandfather or my grandson. And I think when you can find that universality in people, no matter how it's manifest in contemporary fashions and tastes and so on, then you have intergenerational communication. And that's why I think I can communicate with all our youngsters today, and I communicate very well with my children because we seek to find common ground, and I joke with them about millennials. But ultimately, my point to them is we're not that different. What is our common ground? We do not have the same taste in food and K-pop and this or that, I may not know Facebook as much as you do, but you know essentially social media has changed the world in some ways, it hasn't changed it you in every single way either. So so I wouldn't be, I'm I mean right now, for example this is sort of aside from SMU, but right now in Banyan Tree, we're trying to now add just Banyan Tree to be more suitable for millennials, so my daughter is involved in all the redesigning the hotels. But we both concur that, what people want as millennials and what people wanted from a Banyan Tree experience, fundamentally are the same, regardless of generations. So I would say, what do millennials want out of a SMU education, fundamentally it should not be any different than what anybody wants out of a good education. And to me, one of the key things is, and this is what we were not teaching, is teaching people how to think for themselves. Millennials now value that more perhaps than previous generations, but it doesn't change the fundamental, in my view anyway, the fundamental purpose of education is to teach you how to think for yourself and if we can do that well for millennials, I think they'll be happy even if it comes from the fuddy-duddy 65 year-old.

- TSS: Do you think SMU as an institution can still maintain your term “authenticity”? We were meant to be different, we are different, but going forward I mean you know, how long, how else can you differentiate yourself?
- HKP: I think that's a good question. SMU, at least in my view, when we first set it up, I had a clear vision of what I wanted tertiary education to be, and I am totally unqualified for it. I had a clear vision of what I wanted a young educated Singaporean to be, very clear ideas what I wanted. I did not start out with an idea that I wanted to be different from NUS and NTU, they were never my frames of reference. It just so happened that what I wanted to do, the other two universities, in my view, were not delivering. So having said that, the frame of reference for us should not, should never be we want how do we be different from NUS and NTU. It should always be, what do we want to be. And if along the way some of what we want to be happens to overlap with what NUS and NTU is doing, so be it, fine. Some of it doesn't, so be it fine also. So of course, we do talk about differentiation at the more tactical level. One needs to talk about, we need to differentiate, our business school from their business school. Obviously so we focus more on finance, they may focus more on organizational behavior or whatever so that we do differentiate, but at the more industry level, the more tactical level. But in terms of the vision for a university, we should be guided by what we ourselves want and I think, that to me is the continuing guarantee for SMU's success. The surefire guarantee for failure is hubris, and I see that in some cases and the last thing I do whenever I see SMU people beginning to pat ourselves on the back and say we're the best thing since baked bread and so on, then I say to them, my god if everybody believes that. Put it the other way, nobody some PR here is it? I always say to me a PR department is extremely important in a company but if you are in the company and you believe your PR department, then you are dead. Never believe your PR department! Just believe that they got to go and bullshit everything about you to convince everybody else, but if you believe your own PR and you think you're that great as what your PR tells you are, then, you're the problem. And that to me is it's the same complacency in politics, as elsewhere, and in companies, and in universities. So I've always liked the fact that you know LKY (Lee Kuan Yew) himself said like Andrew Groves motto that “only the paranoid survive” and I think as long as we remain paranoid in SMU, we will be ok.
- TSS: Perhaps one way to make sure you don't have hubris and complacency, maybe is to have a foreign president. That would differentiate. Now it doesn't differentiate yourself from NTU.
- HKP: We have had four foreign presidents. So what is different there? What would differentiate is to have a local president.
- TSS: You are right. But I guess if someone is from outside of Singapore society, he will not take things as a given. He or she would query it bit more, would not have baggage, and that's how we you know get fresh ideas?
- HKP: Are you postulating that, are you saying we we've had foreign presidents so...
- TSS: Right, and the decision to do that, to select the presidents was that that they were not Singaporeans and they would not bring baggage with them, unless I'm totally wrong. That they come, they were all academics they came from outside of Singapore. They can give you a fresh view without saying, at my previous institution it was done like this.
- HKP: I would say certainly from me and I guess I'm more involved in to choice of presidents and anybody else because even for Tony Tan, it was just a matter of approving. I have never been guided by the idea that foreign president would by itself, by in and in itself, be necessarily

better. We looked around a lot from within Singapore, but there are not that many people with the diversity of experience that they could have gotten. There was a clear problem that I had to deal with in the outset, and that was cliques of people coming from the two universities. One of the major reasons why it would have been problematic to have had somebody from NUS or NTU was, even with foreign presidents, we were already having some people who were clearly the NTU clique and the NUS clique, and it was not healthy. So to me, part of the decision was clearly not to get somebody from NUS or NTU clique, so by definition I suppose, it had to be a foreigner, but it was more an imperative. I was compelled towards because of these reasons as opposed to saying right, let's get a foreigner straight away. It was not because of that it was because of, at the very beginning, even before we had the whole team of people, before we appointed the first president, we already had a core group of people who came out, including Chin Tiong, including Teck Ming. Tan Teck Ming from the NTU camp and Tan Chin Tiong from the other and there were others. I began to realize early on this is a problem, you only had Singapore with two universities. You had two universities that were led by long-standing Vice Chancellors who did not believe in a collegial system, not like today. Today, everybody is very collegial. In those days, if you quit NUS and you join NTU, you were blacklisted forever. And they were very powerful presidents of universities, not like now when it's much more American style and collegial and you're first among equals. They were there as rulers, you were not. Decision about the choice of Dean's will not be done through an international dean search, it was done by the president, so it was a statutory board kind of system. So we clearly wanted an outsider, that is true, not necessarily a foreigner. Now, looking for an outsider, the trouble is how many Singaporean outsiders are there? There aren't a lot, so it evolved eventually because of the partnership with Wharton and the Wharton curriculum that we did a pedagogy, we decided to have we said let's get a Wharton insider and that's how Janice came along. It was not because we wanted a foreigner and to be fair although I'm very proud that we had a woman that's our first president, it wasn't because oh she ticks all the boxes you know, she is now a woman then it's great, it wasn't because of that either. So I think it was a constant, what evolved was always a conscious response to an evolving situation and we responded to each situation accordingly, rather than had a preconception, at least regarding the leadership of the university.

TSS: Would you take a break or water? Can I just move on to ranking now? You once told me, you know Singapore and Singaporeans are like this, they go by the numbers, they go by ranking, who is number one? My children should join this University because it's ranked high. We have been ranked, as you know, is separately at that School of Economics, you know, School of Business, with in that cohort, but not in most of the top ranking institutions. How long do you think we can avoid being ranked or we still have very good reasons.

HKP: It's not a matter of how long can we avoid being ranked. I don't think we've ever tried to avoid being ranked and Howard knows this very well. It was with his leadership of AACSB at that time, he helped us a lot with ranking. I think all of us have to be absolutely realistic. We all say we don't like rankings until we get to be ranked number one then we love rankings. We also say rankings shouldn't be important at all, except that we get a bit of chuff when we are working in a company or institution that's ranked number one, or if our child gets accepted into a number one institution. So we have to be honest that we should have a healthy disrespect for the all-arching importance of ranking but we should also be realistic that we as much as other parents and everybody else are competitive and to the extent, and only to the extent that rankings, indicate a very superficial amount of competitiveness. We have to live with rankings. You can't get rid of it, people will be guided by it in America, Europe, as well as

in Singapore. So you know, everybody's very happy that we're ranked the least corrupt society or the easiest place to do work or whatever, so everybody likes it. The problem we do have is, we should be ranked but we can't be ranked because we're not a comprehensive university. So we can only get ranked in specific departments and so on but you know that is good, that is very okay for postgraduate. When you're in the postgraduate field everybody recognizes there's no best university. There are peaks of excellence in every university so at the postgraduate level, by the time you're trying to do your masters and you look around the world, you actually have already heard from your supervisor probably which are the best universities for this field or that field, so we're okay there. The trouble was for undergraduates, how many undergraduates, or their high school teachers, or their parents will tell you that XYZ is best for this and ABC is best for that? They just know the brand, and we are never mentioned. So the only, we're going to have to live with this, as long as we want to be a social sciences university. I think LSE is not it's not ranked as a university either right, very often, so you rise above it. You even have a funny name like London School of Economics rather than university but after a while those in the know recognize it is one of the premier universities of the world. I think we're going to have to be, we'll have to live with such a fate, unless government decides that they're going to create a comprehensive university. That's, then you can speculate on the SUTD and SMU will merge or not. That's a separate matter.

TSS: Can you comment about our board of trustees? You, especially in the early years, you had a major say in selecting the members, and outsiders have commented to me that we have a very strong board, even today, simply because we didn't have the usual suspects that the other two universities would have, of the usual lawyers, accountants, doctors, MOE types. I think you were probably quite deliberate in getting people of very different working backgrounds in the first few boards of SMU and probably in as subsequent boards too. Because we've got academics and we've got businessmen and am I right that part of your selection was because you value independent thinking, you were actually selecting people whom you know, who thought, who had independent thinking on various issues.

HKP: Well, yes and no. Yes, meaning I have clear criteria for choosing members of the board and no, in the sense I don't think that they're all that different today from people who on the boards of our other autonomous universities. Obviously I can't recall who are on the boards of our universities when they were stat boards, but I look at the people who on the boards of NUS and NTU and they are very good people, cut from the same cloth as from us. I think there may be a few reasons why we might be different even though we're cut from the same cloth, the same people.

HKP: *The board makes decisions that count, there is a sense of comradeship, there is no second guessing, and the sky is the limit. I like to take bets at BOT meetings, as a way to break the ice.*

*I hoped to integrate SMU into the precinct. We had to deal with access issues in the city. The concourse successfully linked SMU buildings but it is hidden. In Hong Kong, the above ground navigation is very good. On hindsight, we should have developed something similar, however it would have needed LTA and government support.*

*We turned down the offer of HDB blocks for residential housing for SMU. I wanted a sense of identity and offer a mandatory stay for all first year students.*

HT: *You picked the Wharton model and yet you speak about being the LSE of the East.*

HKP: *We did not want the LSE pedagogy, which was deep and narrow. Instead we wanted the Wharton model which is broad for 2 years.*

HT: *It seems like the relationship between you and Tony Tan was key, there was mutual trust, you knew what each other wanted, you get it done, with an absence of bureaucracy.*

HKP: So I'll never know, right, because he's not exactly the most expressive person in talking about these things.

TSS: And unbeknownst to us what he had to do with the cabinet, like there has to be a certain amount on persuading the cabinet

HKP: Oh sure, I am sure there was ... there would it be resistance to it

TSS: Okay we are continuing the tape and we would like to just conclude because earlier on we're talking about LSE of the East and you probably feel that perhaps, it may not be very fruitful to talk about models because you may want to pick something from a model and discard something.

HKP: Yes.

TSS: Of the same model

HKP: Yes, I mean just put on the record. LSE, we use it as a means to highlight the point that you can have a very reputable international university comprising purely the social sciences. LSE was never a model for us in terms of its method of pedagogy. The pedagogy and then, that having been said, we also decided early on, at the same time that we decided that we did not want to have a Wharton-SMU joint degree, we had decided that we wanted to be SMU and have partners of choice for specific areas. And we clearly chose Wharton, partly by luck because they were willing to do it, as the model for the business school, because we felt it was a very innovative undergraduate business school and we then used that pedagogy pretty much everywhere. But we clearly said that we didn't want to be seen as a Wharton clone and that's why intentionally we went to Carnegie Mellon and so on and so forth. And frankly, I think Yale NUS should have been Yale tying up with NUS School of Arts and Social Sciences would have been better than a separate Yale NUS College. That is an aside.

TSS: Chairman, you have spoken for one and a half, one hour 15 minutes non-stop. Howard, do you have a burning question so that we can conclude things?

HKP: This is almost getting to be like Castro, if I just go on for another one and a half hour, it would be a three-hour monologue.

HT: I don't think, I don't think we want to do that but if you had to describe, you know and you've been chair of this the school since the beginning, if you have to describe your strategy, forget whether you know the relationship with Tony Tan for me, you had to describe your strategy of that period. Can you identify certain strategic leaps that you made on the way? I mean it sounds to me like the first strategic leap was, you know that you wanted to be the metaphor the LSE of the East, right?

HKP: I wouldn't say that the first strategic leap, if I had to choose one at all, the first one I would have chosen, was that I wanted to have, as much as possible within the Singapore educational system, I wanted something as close to an American-style pedagogy, and when I say American-style pedagogy, I would be quite specific about it. One is the possibility, which we

still haven't achieved, we're trying to see, in fact what we may be coming out now, with the first year, where, you know, we're talking at a university level but allowing some student to come in first year and choose no discipline. To me, the hallmarks of the American educational sector, the tertiary sector which I would have liked to emulate is that you can go into university without having pre-chosen your discipline, because then you can delay your choice. I think that's always good when you look at young Singaporeans, who score well, and I always am amazed by how they want to do both law and medicine which are worlds apart and they want to do it simply because they have high scores and they had no real loved one or the other. So I wanted to create that. And I wanted to create, so that's the first one, the second philosophical part about the American educational system, much in which I don't like, but the one that I did like also was one whereby there was much more flexibility in the creation of your own major, using the credit system you can essentially build your own major and build your own specialization. I think those two facets of an American-style education and not many other things, are best suited for this so-called disruptive world we're talking about. It can delay your decision making of being pigeon-holed and it allows you to create your own specialization, everything that we talked about today. So, the LSE is many ways an anti-thesis so I should withdraw that back. Within the context of the Singapore system, the main reason I accepted this to do SMU, was the acceptance by Tony Tan, that within the constraints of the overall system, which you did not even need to ask about, you knew that was a national system. I could try to introduce more of these things. That would be the first strategic leap and that's why you get this big misnomer that American education is fine, when we say oh we're like an American-style university, we're hardly like an American-style university. We don't even have those two major attributes but already by trying to not go deep, but to go broader, that's already a little bit more towards this, I hate the word holistic, it's a more broad-based educational philosophy, so that would be the first, very first strategic intent, even way before all the other things.

TSS: And the next the next one?

HKP: The next one, would have been the decision to go it alone and find different partners. The third one would have been to establish yourself in the outset using signals such as tuition, signals that we were going to be a premium university and we weren't going to be apologetic about it. Those two would probably be, in my view, the three most important attributes; the style of education or the ethos of education, the pride in yourself that we are going to become the best whatever we call it to be and we would do it with partners but we will not be depending on partners, which gives you a certain, which indicates to certain people, a certain amount of or what you call chutzpah, you know kind of like you got the bravado to say "I'm gonna do it" which appeals to some people, that you guys got the bravado and the guts to want to do it. And the third one is; we are so confident of our quality, we will price ourselves right at the beginning with no apologies. Those three key decisions, I think set the tone for a lot of things that came in afterwards.

HT: And the School of Social Sciences the fourth one?

HKP: What do you mean the fourth decision?

HT: I mean you know I was trying to get you to evolve your strategic positioning over 17 years, you know not very subtle way for which I apologize. Then would the next one have been that in the mind, in your mind and Tony Tan's mind from the beginning it was just a school of social sciences.

HKP: Let me try to recall back what other you know, this more than me, but in the very beginning, we had at the very launch we had Business, Econs and

TSS: Social Science

HKP: At the very beginning? No, I don't think so, I think we had Accountancy, they were together with accountancy, business, the third was economics, which was an accident of history. It wouldn't be logical because Bobby Mariano was willing to come. He was a world-class econometrician, etc. but it wouldn't have a normal one. I think that, you want to talk about that aspect of it. The fourth decision was to become, to aspire to be, not to become because it is not immediate, but to aspire to become, to aspire to be eventually a social sciences university with a strong grounding in management. From the very beginning, we already knew we didn't want to be a business school that's why we consciously took out the name business, so it was, Singapore Management University and we had originally been said we could foresee ourselves doing management of health sciences, management of the arts, management, anything that involved management we would focus on, that was the initial view. Subsequently, when we first started the School of Social Sciences, it really wasn't at that time with this broad aspiration, it was in order to support the notion that we could be a management university. You had to have certain social sciences capability. I think it's only in the last ten years, with Arnoud coming in and our continuing debate, where we had established ourselves. Before you establish yourself, you can't do anything. So it's only a 20 year old university. We took 10 years to even establish as SMU Business School and School of Systems Science and the School of Accountancy as being acceptable in Singapore among its peers, so the Accountancy was top etc. Before them, I don't think we even had the aspiration that we would be a social sciences university. It was, let's even be the best with these three that we've got. Then we got permission to do law. I think that was what changed the thinking, because otherwise, if we kept to economics, we kept to, if that hadn't come around, we would probably have been mainly a management university with a social sciences department which serviced the other major faculties, as you know well the need for such servicing. But it would have been mainly systems science, it would be economics, it would be a bit of an outlier, it would have been Accountancy and the various professions. When Law, which was not in our original concept was accepted, then we said well, law is no longer management as such. Why don't we then aspire to be a social sciences University? Then it grew and I think the next phase for SMU, really, for whoever the next president will be, to define it, what that we to actualize it. How do you really become a school of social sciences? Of course I'm a bit pissed off that SUSS has now stolen the name, but I think if we really want to be a social sciences university we now have to really define what is it that makes you a social sciences university, in concrete terms. That's the next challenge, I think.

HT: So the redefinition of a social science university in reality, in terms of the strategy, that then follows was the law school because you seem to be arguing that business, accountancy and you know, IT established themselves as highly credible and then when the law school came, it provided the platform beyond which you could

HKP: Yes, well, it gave us the first inkling that we should even think about it. Before and we were less than 10 years old, we were not thinking about a law school. We were thinking about Accountancy, Business basically Accountancy and Business and Systems Science, which is very much management oriented. Then when law came, and we were allowed to do law then we said, let's, now that we have got law. We should start thinking about the world beyond law. What are the kinds of social sciences can we actually do? Now, we haven't actualized it yet.

How do you become a strong social sciences university? SMU-X is also important in terms of pedagogy. We're still trying to see, SMU-X is a good example when you ask me how do we differentiate ourselves. By doing SMU-X, we are differentiating ourselves. But we didn't choose SMU-X because we said we needed something differentiating. We said, what is the pedagogy of the future which our students need in order to really prepare them for the future? And we, in order to also give them some experience that is different from what they're getting now. The frame of reference should always be yourself. You should always compete against yourself and say, how do I make myself better, and by so doing I'm already probably different from the others. I think that's the kind of approach I always want to see in SMU.

TSS: On that note, I think we can end this wonderful interview. If I may say so, not because of my questions but because of your answers. Thank you, thank you, Chairman, thank you team!

HKP: Thank you, have fun transcribing all this hours of tape.