

**SMU Academic Year Opening Ceremony
Remarks by President Arnoud De Meyer
Friday, 17th of August 2018, School of Law**

Mr Lim Chee Onn, Pro-Chancellor of SMU;
Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman of the SMU Board of Trustees;
Members of the Board of Trustees;
Professor John Niland;
Faculty, staff and students of SMU;

A good afternoon and welcome to the start of the Academic Year 2018-2019.

Welcome

To the representatives of our freshmen and women, in particular, I want to extend to you a very warm welcome and my heartfelt congratulations! You made it through SMU's holistic application process and you are now a member of the SMU community. I know that you already know the campus quite well, having gone through the freshmen orientation on our Campus Green and some camps of the schools and clubs. I hope you enjoyed these activities in July and August, the school academic briefings, the many student performances on our campus this afternoon and Vivace, our mega fair for student clubs.

I am also pleased to see the senior students back on campus. I am sure you had a great time with holidays, summer courses, camps, internships, community service, etc. I hope you are happy to be back at SMU with fresh energy and enthusiasm.

Finally, I also welcome back many of our faculty who had a busy time over the summer with conferences and other research activities and who, from Monday onwards, will be in the thick of teaching again.

Meaningful Impact

As many of you in this room will know, we have since the beginning of 2018 complemented the SMU brand from being a "Different U" to be a "University with Meaningful Impact". This has been visually translated to "Imagine Better". The start of the academic year is perhaps a good time to reflect on what we mean by this "Meaningful Impact".

Since decades, if not centuries, societies have assumed that universities have a positive socio-economic impact on them. Intuitively societies have accepted that supplying a well-educated workforce to government and business, and carrying out research that ultimately would lead to commercialisation, were sufficient for an advanced society. Universities often also offered significant social mobility, in particular, if they provided public or private financial support systems and an admissions policy that is needs blind. Finally, universities are often the magnet to attract talented people as well as excellent intellectual and cultural activities, thereby creating a stimulating environment with a high quality of life.

These and other advantages created by universities were rarely challenged but the more taxpayers had to pay for Institutes of Higher Education, the more there were attempts to quantify these positive effects. Indeed the correlations between the quality of the university

systems and measures of socio-economic developments are positive. The 2018 report by the World Bank Group on the Changing Nature of Work estimates that the global average private return to tertiary education is 15.8%. I can also refer to recent analysis by Times Higher Education that suggests that research quality as measured by field-weighted impact, research productivity as measured by the numbers of papers produced per head of population, and enrolment in tertiary education, correlate quite strongly with factors such as Gross National Income per capita, or the UN human development index. – My colleagues will be quick to point out that correlations don't say anything about causality, and it may well be true that rich countries develop good university systems in order to respond to the demand of the population.

Without going into an academic discussion, my point is that there were significant and relatively reassuring attempts to quantify the impact of universities. But during the early 2000s more voices were raised questioning whether the return on the investment in higher education was worth it, or whether the impact of university was meaningful rather than marginal.

Such questions were raised because of some negative signals. Let me just quote five of them:

- Higher education did not always lead to better jobs, and in several countries, from North Africa to Korea there was significant graduate unemployment or under-employment.
- The ideal of education as a significant tool for social mobility has often been challenged
- Governments did not always see the return on the investment in R&D in the growth of their GDP, and started asking questions about universities' true commitment to commercialisation and monetisation of research outcomes. This was particularly relevant in smaller countries that do not have the absorptive industrial capacity to bring research results into practice.
- While the average return on investment as quoted by the World Bank was 15.8 %, the average hid a wide range of different situations. The real return depends on a range of factors that include the quality of the university, student composition, types of discipline and the availability of jobs.
- And some politicians, in particular in the USA, doubted whether the public sector should actually be involved in financing universities. They want to redefine the roles of the state and the markets in the organisation of universities. -- As a side note, our colleagues Hiro Saito and Alwyn Lim are working on a research project on how the worldwide commercialisation of universities is affecting the publicness of universities.

Such questions led, in first instance in the United Kingdom, to a demand that universities should document and measure their impact. In the 2014 REF (research evaluation framework) the UK government asked the universities to document their impact through case studies. -- Impact was defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia. This has led to a wealth of case studies, also sections in the annual reports of UK, and more recently US universities, quantifying their impact through the number of jobs created, spin-off enterprises launched, increased salaries for their graduates, growth engendered through immigration of international students, or cultural events supported.

What can Meaningful Impact be for SMU

We can easily produce a similar set of statistics, showing the socio-economic impact of SMU. For example, if our graduates were to have an increase of \$1000 in their monthly salaries based on their degree, we create additional value for our 24000 alumni of close to \$360M per year. Having about 80 startups by our graduates each year also makes a significant impact on Singapore. And through the community service, we give about 270,000 hours back to society per year.

But I am convinced that SMU will have to reflect a lot more on how we enhance our impact on society. Perhaps our faculty, staff, students and researchers could do this together. Let me make five (simple) propositions:

1. Our transformative education needs to give students the opportunity to become graduates that will make a difference. We do this in four ways:
 - a. In the World Bank report that I mentioned earlier, it is argued that tertiary education systems need to guarantee a minimum threshold of transferable cognitive skills. But it also emphasizes that incorporating more general education in tertiary programmes, such as critical thinking, problem-solving and communications, renders the acquisition and application of the transferable skills more effective. At SMU, we do this through our holistic undergraduate education, which we have recently reinforced through the review and revision of the core curriculum through the Blue Ribbon Commission.
 - b. Second, in a world where we will live and work longer, formal education is no longer an activity that is limited to a particular period in your life, but should be a continuing activity. And in a world where we have unlimited access to information and knowledge, transfer of knowledge is perhaps less important than learning how to apply knowledge. Therefore we have invested heavily in experiential learning, our so-called SMU-X. I encourage all students here in the room to try out at least one of our more than 30 courses that are based on this idea of experiential learning.
 - c. Third, from this academic year onwards, we are piloting a Residential Living-and-Learning concept at our renovated Prinsep Street Residences. We aim to build a community for the community, where students co-live/work/learn together, and they are also nurtured to be change agents by giving back to the Bras Basah community. We hope to nurture well-rounded students with strong esprit de corps, as they collaborate in projects and activities to make a meaningful impact in their immediate communities. I want to thank the representatives of OCBC, present here in the hall today, for their generous gift to support this initiative, which enables 10 students to reside at Prinsep Street Residences.
 - d. And fourth, we are still totally committed to the idea of social mobility. Last year, we created the bond free SMU Access programme that ensures that no student who is financially disadvantaged would miss out on an SMU Undergraduate Education due to the lack of financial resources.
2. While I strongly support disciplinary research for our junior faculty, partially as a way to build their reputation, I also hope that our more senior faculty will engage in larger scale interdisciplinary research projects that addresses the issues we have to cope

with here in Singapore. We have many examples of those, but I would encourage us to invest more in the design phase in what I would call “design for application”. Let’s think from the start of a research project on how its outcome can have impact on our society

3. I already referred to the need for life-long learning. A little more than a year ago, SMU and other universities here in Singapore created units to respond to the government’s plans for continuing education, under the banner of SkillsFutures. Our own SMU Academy has been very successful. But I am convinced that we are still in the early stages of discovering how to create meaningful impact through adult learning programmes. The whole university world needs to invest in having a better understanding of how adults learn, with a more systematic diagnosis of the specific needs and constraints faced by adults and devise flexible delivery models that fit well with adult lifestyles.
4. With our beautiful city campus, I hope that we can be a magnet for socio-cultural activities. With the Arts Fest, the activities around our urban garden “SMU Grow”, our commitment to Diversity and Integration, etc. we have already a multitude of lively activities on campus. But I would like to throw a challenge to our students to do even more, to make the SMU campus one of the “buzziest” places in the city centre.
5. And finally I hope to see more international students on our campus, either as full time students or for an exchange programme. I was struck by a recent speech of Australian PM Turnbull at UNSW, when he said and I quote: “Just as trade deals, economic partnerships and security agreements all foster community among countries, so too the connections that [universities] forge build bridges across the seas that separate us physically from our regional partners. [Universities] bring the world together. International education is so much more than foreign students coming to study [here] and leaving with a degree. Every arrival here is the start of a relationship that grows, adopts, renews and ultimately benefits us all.”

Having seen the dynamism and commitment to Singapore by our alumni in their associations in Indonesia, Myanmar, Hong Kong, several cities in China, Manila, etc., I am convinced that SMU’s meaningful impact through our international alumni goes far beyond Singapore.

We can do a lot more to have that meaningful impact on society. I call on faculty, staff and all of our students to ensure that the SMU community makes a truly meaningful impact. That will help to make SMU that Great University that we aspire to be.

Thank you and I wish you a great academic year ahead.