

**Thank You Speech by Professor Arnoud De Meyer  
at the Occasion of the Transfer of the  
Presidency of Singapore Management University**

Your Excellency Mdm Halimah Yacob, President of the Republic of Singapore;

Education Minister Ong Ye Kung;

Dr. Tony Tan Keng Yam, Honorary Patron of SMU;

Mr. J.Y Pillay, Chancellor of SMU;

Mr. Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman of SMU;

Trustees, colleagues, students, alumni and friends of SMU.

Let me start by thanking Minister Ong Ye Kung, Chairman Ho Kwon Ping, and our Chancellor, Mr. J.Y. Pillay for the very kind words and the honour of being conferred the title, University Professor at Singapore Management University. This means a lot for me. I will be able to continue my link to SMU, an institution to which I have given the best of me over the last 8 years.

When I reflected on what I could share with you today, I realised that I should talk neither about the past at SMU nor about its future.

The past has been mentioned by several others and, for the record, it is well documented in my regular State of the University speeches. Talking about what is to come for SMU would sound as lecturing to the incoming team. Therefore, I will focus for a few minutes on why I am so passionate about education, what I learned from SMU, and what I see as the factors that contributed to the success of building a new University like SMU.

### **Why am I passionate about higher education?**

I know that there are in this room many representatives from other sectors and industries, be it finance, FMCG, health, energy or IT. But frankly speaking, can one be in a better or more impactful sector than education and research? Both have a long lasting impact on society. Research will change the face of the world through a better understanding of how that world operates and through the innovation it can engender. And if we educate our graduates well, we will have a lasting positive impact on our societies for the next 40 years. Steven Pinker, who has documented in several of his books the real progress the world has made since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, put it crisply when he argued (and I paraphrase) that as sentient beings, or people who are able to feel or perceive things, we have the potential to flourish, to progress. But we need to refine our faculty to reason through learning and debate. We need to seek explanations of the natural world through science, and get insights into the human condition through the arts and humanities. Helping young adults to develop their capabilities for life to “flourish through reason” is what I remain passionate about. In that sense I am probably still a product of the

eighteenth century enlightenment. I hope that my colleagues will keep that same passion for our mission of discovery and education. There is really little that beats education when you want to influence society.

### **What did I learn from SMU?**

Let me come to my second topic. What did I learn from SMU? I often remember one of the early conversations I had with Chairman Ho, even before I signed the contract for my current position. While I don't remember the exact wordings, I know that I asked him something akin to: "Why do you want to recruit me? SMU is, first and foremost, an institution for undergraduate education for Singapore students, i.e. with a strong national/local mission. My experience was with two graduate business schools with a very strong international, if not global orientation." Chairman answered: "That is exactly why we want you. We know how to run a Singapore based undergraduate University, what we want to learn is how to develop graduate programmes and grow a strong international reputation." I leave it to others to judge how well we have succeeded. But what I do remember is that I came with quite some curiosity about the differences between undergraduates and graduate students. And guess what? The interaction with our undergraduates has probably been one of the most enriching experiences I have had. I learned about their passions, their interests and opinions, their commitment, their doubts and their attitudes. Sometimes I was taken by surprise; sometimes they opened up a whole new world of experiences for me. Always they provided me with energy.

Yes, I got energy out of the interaction with them. And they kept me young in my thinking.

The second lesson I learned from SMU is the power of an entrepreneurial “can do” attitude. Frankly speaking, the proposition to create a great internationally recognised University, specialised in disciplines ranging from law to applied social sciences and computing, was not obvious. Over the last 8 years, there were many proposals, ideas and initiatives to contribute to creating that great University. Sometimes there was resistance, sometimes these proposals turned out to be inappropriate, if not irrelevant. But rarely was there resistance against experimentation. There was a real can do attitude to build that new and great University. And it is an attitude that staff, faculty and students share. I saw the power of an entrepreneurial “can do” attitude and culture. It is a real gem. By the way, it is probably the real reason why I chose to come to SMU. The choice 8 years ago between joining a smallish unknown undergraduate University in Singapore, or staying on as a professor and Dean of a business school at one of the top Universities in the world was not a straightforward one. But it was precisely the entrepreneurial spirit, and the opportunity to grow a University beyond its initial design specifications, and the freedom that was given to develop and implement some of my ideas, that attracted me.

**Why is SMU successful?**

Which leads me to the next question. What can one learn from SMU's experience about developing a new University? There are of course many. I will limit myself here to six:

1. I am convinced that one of the most important success factors of SMU is its governance system. The combination of the concept of an autonomous University with an excellent system of a demanding Board of Trustees and set of committees that always understood very well the distinction between governance and management, has determined the success of SMU. The concept of an autonomous university that can be managed without direct interference, and that within the context of a performance and policy agreement, has been one of the most important factors contributing to the success of Singapore's universities. And the business attitude that SMU's trustees brought to the university was a significant driver for our development.
2. The choice to be a research driven University is the second factor. I am sure there must have been occasions when there was a temptation to let SMU develop into a teaching oriented University. That would never have attracted me, and neither would it have attracted many of our outstanding and influential colleagues. A University needs to develop thought leadership, and infuse its education with the results of the new insights developed by our researchers. I am proud that over the years, we have been able to combine top quality disciplinary research with a set of larger scale interdisciplinary research programmes, thereby making meaningful impact on our society.

3. A third factor contributing to our success is the willingness to innovate both through our research and through the continuous development of our educational concept. The 20<sup>th</sup> century model of a University, anchored in the Von Humboldt University model, and going back to Immanuel Kant's philosophy, was based on disciplinary specialisation, education limited in time (and usually between the age of 18 to 28), isolated from practice, and for an elite. It is not a model that SMU has opted for. We have committed ourselves to a broader model of learning, i.e.:

- one that believes in lifelong learning, and should thus prepare the graduate for a career of continuous learning;
- one that is deeply integrated with practice, as demonstrated by the compulsory internships, the experiential learning, and the integration between what is going on in the classroom and non-curricular activities, e.g. community service and overseas exposure;
- one that fosters interdisciplinary interactions in education and research;
- one that promotes social mobility through programmes, e.g. SMU Access;
- and one that creates a sense of social responsibility: I do believe that our graduates enter the professional world with a broader sense of social commitment and engagement.

4. The fourth factor for our success is the openness to learn from others. We had so much to learn from the experience of other universities, locally and internationally. We have benefited from the

insights of all the faculty and staff that joined us from overseas. SMU is, to some extent, a melting pot of the best we could learn from Wharton, Carnegie Mellon, NUS and NTU, Cambridge, Austin, Emory, University of New South Wales, and so many others institutions that one way or another have influenced us. And we are still benefitting significantly from our recruitment of faculty and students from overseas.

5. Next, I want to stress that building a university requires teamwork. It is the diverse team of colleagues who ran and runs the university that really have built it. I have once heard a business person describing universities as a collection of floating islands, as opposed to a hierarchical organisation. That is perhaps taking it too far as an image. But it is true that as a President, one can only be a coach and a custodian of the human capital of the university, which is unlike a traditional CEO.
6. And finally, our clear focus has increased the speed of our development. Yes, we are a university with very different disciplines. But in our DNA, there is this commitment to the interaction between business, government and civic society; there is a focus on improving society through entrepreneurship, trade and industry; a focus on creating a sustainable world by collaborating across sectors. Perhaps we don't define it always that explicitly. But we know what we are about. And that helps tremendously in making difficult choices.

## **Conclusion**

I should not go on for too long. SMU has been an incredible journey for me. I thoroughly enjoyed it. And I should thank you all for it. I see so many people here in this room who have contributed to SMU's success: Trustees, Provost and Vice-Provosts, Deans and current and former management of SMU, my assistant, faculty, staff, students, donors, members of advisory boards, representatives from the Government and in particular MOE, all of you have made SMU possible and have supported me. Thank you all for that.

There is little left for me but to wish SMU and the incoming team all the best. You can count on my full support.