



**Welcome Remarks by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, SMU Chairman  
SMU Patron's Day 2020  
SMU Hall  
Friday 17 January 2020**

Excellency, President of Singapore and Patron of SMU, Madam Halimah Yacob;  
SMU Honorary Patron Dr Tony Tan;  
SMU Chancellor Mr Lim Chee Onn and Pro-Chancellor Mr Eddie Teo;  
Members of the SMU Board of Trustees;  
Distinguished guests;  
SMU faculty, staff, alumni and students;

Good evening.

This event kicks off a very important year for SMU – our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary! For the entire SMU community this is an opportunity not just to celebrate but also reflect on how we got here and where we go now.

For me personally it actually started 23 years ago in 1997 with a private conversation between then Deputy Prime Minister Dr Tony Tan and myself, when my somewhat critical and unorthodox ideas about Singapore's universities resonated with his own intentions to shake up the tertiary sector.

I took up his challenge – not just to criticise but to effect meaningful change – and recruited a few unsuspecting, foolishly intrepid souls, and we started to envision the future. If only we knew what we were getting into!

We had no money, not even any association nor contact with MOE at all, and so I offered the ground floor of Banyan Tree's modest office building in Upper Bukit Timah road as the project development team's temporary offices. As the team grew it moved on to other rental premises until the first temporary campus on Evans Road was built.

Now demolished, this first home of SMU seemed grand to many of us who started the university without a name, without a proper business plan, but with only some ideas and continuing guidance and encouragement from Dr Tan. We went through several permutations before the final concept was fixed and Dr Tan took it to Cabinet.

This was the humble genesis of what became Singapore Management University.

This and many other recollections have been captured in the oral history archives which I set up when SMU moved to its current campus, because I knew that in the

many decades and even hundreds of years to come, memories become narratives and then history and form part of the institutional memory and culture of a community.

After all, a university is not about buildings nor libraries nor even students or faculty; it is about a community committed to both tradition and innovation at the same time, a repository of a society's entire knowledge and simultaneously, the vanguard of its relentless search for new ideas.

Translating these lofty ideals into reality involved circuitous steps, legal structures, and stages. However, unchanging throughout was the ambition to do something different, to break away from the mould which characterized the two existing universities. The catchy slogan "A Different U" was not just a cute pun; it underlined the entire ethos of the SMU culture.

SMU is indeed unique. We took parts of the American and particularly the Wharton model of seminar-style teaching in small classes and made it our pedagogical point of difference. Instead of depth, we emphasised breadth and a holistic approach to knowledge acquisition.

To walk the talk about social responsibility we made it compulsory to do measurable community service. To mitigate our lack of dormitory living much less overseas studying, we committed to achieving 100% overseas experience for every single student, whether through exchange programmes or study missions.

To inculcate closer industry relevance, we introduced internship programmes for all our students. To compensate for lack of sports grounds we encouraged the creation of more physically active student clubs on a per capita basis, than the other universities. Just witness the quality of our diversified student clubs and you will have an idea of how successful this has been.

To debunk the idea that young Singaporeans are inarticulate nerds and geeks who cannot stand their ground in self-expression and resourcefulness compared with their Western counterparts, we ensured that homework would be mainly via group projects and group presentations.

Finally, in the last few years, we embarked on the most difficult mark of a university's maturity – the development of a reputable post-graduate programme and a respected research capability.

In celebrating our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it may seem as if the past two decades just happened by itself, as if our present success was pre-ordained. On the contrary, SMU's remarkable success in such a short period was achieved only through the collective determination of the pioneer faculty, trustees, students and management, many of whom are here today.

In 20 short years, we have come a long way. SMU has evolved from a spunky start up to a mature institution. But the values and ideals which infused the early pioneers – to innovate, to create value, to be purposeful – must be even stronger today than at SMU's birth.

Having come this far is perhaps the easy part. Building upon success, challenging the past and rejecting hubris, is now the task of the next two decades.

To summarise the vision, we created a slogan – Imagine Better – as a call to action. We want to imagine a better university, a better Singapore, a better world, where we are proud of, but not satisfied by, nor complacent about, our collective success as a society or an institution.

I am confident that the entire SMU community – past, present and future students, faculty, trustees, and donors – will embrace this challenge to Imagine Better, and ensure that our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary will be quite unforgettable.

Thank you all for being here tonight, have a good evening, and see you during the course of this year of celebration!