

Ex-president Tony Tan honoured for role in setting up SMU

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Former president Tony Tan Keng Yam started drawing up plans in 1997 to set up the Singapore Management University (SMU) when he was deputy prime minister and overseeing higher education.

When formulating the blueprint for the country's third university, he took the opportunity to give differentiation, variety and new directions to Singapore's higher education sector.

Dr Tan was yesterday lauded for this and many other contributions with an honorary Doctor of Laws from SMU. In a speech at the opening ceremony for SMU's commencement at its Victoria Street campus, Dr Tan spoke about his role in setting up the university.

He said: "I first mooted the idea to establish a third university

when I suggested in Parliament in 1997 that Singapore's economy would need 17,000 university graduates by 2000, whereas NUS and NTU could only graduate up to 10,000 students every year."

He and his team decided the new university would focus on business and management because of the way Singapore's economy was evolving, and it would also adopt a different model of education.

So, SMU departed from the British model used for Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National University of Singapore (NUS), and instead took inspiration from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, a renowned business school in the United States, Dr Tan said.

Businessman Ho Kwon Ping, who helms leisure group Banyan Tree and is chairman of the SMU board of trustees, was brought in to head the new institution.

Mr Ho delivered Dr Tan's citation – 25 years after his first meeting with Dr Tan to set up SMU.

In his speech to an audience of about 1,200, Mr Ho detailed Dr Tan's distinguished career, from his days as a lecturer at the University of Singapore – first in physics, then mathematics three years later in 1967. Two years later, he moved to banking at OCBC Bank, before entering politics in 1979.

Over the next 12 years, he held Cabinet positions like the finance, education, and trade and industry portfolios, and was closely involved in the labour movement. In 1991, he stepped down from politics to return to the private sector.

He returned to the Cabinet in 1995 and was made DPM and defence minister. He retired from the Cabinet in 2005 and was appointed chairman of the National Research Foundation and Singapore Press Holdings.

In July 2011, he successfully contested the presidential election, and was sworn in as Singapore's seventh president on Sept 1, 2011.

Mr Ho also said he will turn 70 next month and will be stepping down as SMU chairman after more than 20 years. SMU said it will announce a successor at a later date.

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