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Singapore Management University's (SMU) founding chairman Ho Kwon Ping will step down on Jan 11 next year after 25 years of leadership, the institution announced on Wednesday (Aug 17).

He will be succeeded by DBS Group chief executive officer Piyush Gupta.

As chairman of the university's board of trustees, Mr Ho "made long lasting contributions to SMU in laying a strong foundation and steering SMU to become the distinctive and world-renowned university that it is today, redefining the landscape of higher education in Singapore in the process", SMU said in a media release.

He was also credited with pushing SMU to go "beyond being just a business school and to take a more expansive notion of management rather than business management".

"Under his visionary leadership and skilful stewardship, Mr Ho has led SMU to grow from just having a School of Business into a vibrant and dynamic university with over 12,000 students (and over 36,000 alumni) across eight schools focusing on accountancy, computing and information systems, economics, law, social sciences and their intersections," SMU said.

Mr Ho said: "It has been one of the most significant journeys of my life to have been part of the team of visionary people from faculty to students, management to trustees, who believed that we could make a difference for young Singaporeans.

"My guiding principle from the very beginning to now is that nothing can hold us back from achieving our greatest dreams, except our own self-limiting fear of failure, innovation, change."

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"I retire now with the deepest confidence that what we put in place over the last 25 years will be a solid foundation upon which an even bolder, idealistic vision can become reality," he added.

DBS CEO PIYUSH GUPTA TO TAKE UP POST

Mr Gupta, who has been a member of the SMU board of trustees since January this year, will take the reins when Mr Ho steps down.

"In these fast-changing, disruptive times, universities play a key role, not just in leading and shaping thinking through cutting-edge research, but also in training our young people in multi-disciplinary ways of problem-solving," he said.

"SMU excels in these areas with its focus on providing holistic, transformative and integrative education. The university's close partnership with business and the community is also a key strength.

"Kwon Ping, and the first generation of pioneers, have set an extraordinary benchmark of success, and I look forward to building on their tremendous achievements, working with the board of trustees and university leadership to take SMU to the next level."

Named as one of the world's top 100 best-performing chief executives in the Harvard Business Review in 2019, Mr Gupta was awarded the Public Service Star by President Halimah Yacob in 2020 for his meritorious service to the nation.

"I am pleased to welcome Piyush as the next chairman of the SMU board of trustees," said SMU president Professor Lily Kong.

"On behalf of my management team, we look forward very much to working with Piyush and the board as we steer the university in its next phase of growth."

"REMARKABLE LEADERSHIP"

The founder and executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings and Laguna Resorts and Hotels, as well as executive chairman of Thai Wah Public Company, Mr Ho has been with SMU since the beginning.

He took up the post as chairman of its board of trustees after accepting the Government's invitation to create Singapore's third university in 1997.

Together with then deputy prime minister Dr Tony Tan, he established the university's first principles – that it be "one that focuses on excelling in management and the social sciences; delivering a holistic and broad-based education that would result in well-rounded, initiative-taking young men and women; and instilling a strong sense of personal and social responsibility", SMU said.

With an address in central Singapore, these features set SMU apart in Singapore's tertiary education landscape, the university added.

Mr Ho was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal in 2009 for his contributions in founding and establishing SMU. At the 2017 National Day Awards, he was presented with one of Singapore's highest honours – the prestigious Distinguished Service Order (Darjah Utama Bakti Cemerlang).

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“We are deeply grateful to Kwon Ping for his passion, commitment and remarkable leadership as the founding chairman of the SMU board of trustees,” said Prof Kong.

“Beyond developing the institution from scratch, he has given the SMU management team – past and present – tremendous guidance and support as the university grew from an ‘infant’ to a ‘young adult’.

“The university is deeply indebted to him for his wisdom and counsel. During his term as chairman, Kwon Ping has also personally touched the lives of many in our SMU community – faculty, staff, students, alumni and their family members.

“We sincerely thank him for his selfless dedication to Singapore education and SMU.”

Education Minister Chan Chun Sing also thanked Mr Ho for his contributions, saying that he has played an instrumental role in establishing SMU as Singapore’s first autonomous university.

“He led the development of the university in the heart of the city, and shaped SMU’s holistic broad-based education, including the SMU-X initiative and its multi- and inter-disciplinary programmes, which has produced cohorts of distinctive SMU graduates,” he added. CNA