More than just jobs the grads get

Singapore Management University celebrated its 10th anniversary last Friday. We carry today an excerpt of the speech Ho Kwon Ping, chairman of SMU’s Board of Trustees, delivered on the occasion.

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In the history of societies, defining moments occur when fundamental social conditions are ripe for change, and visionary men and women read the times, seize the moment and create change. Whether it be a political revolution or a movement in the arts or, as in our case, a new approach towards university education, defining moments are the confluence of initiative and opportunity.

As we commemorate the 10th anniversary of Singapore Management University, I’d like to look back. And in reviewing our past to get a handle on the future, I’d especially like to pay tribute to one individual whose vision, unwavering commitment to quality and openness to flexibility has, more than anyone else, made SMU what it is today.

Singapore has justifiably earned its reputation as a nation that places education at the very top of its priorities – as not just a basic human right but also a strategic investment critical to our very survival in a competitive world. Because of this, our national educational system has been academically rigorous and pervasive. But though it has been a resoundingly successful and critical factor in our economic development, by the 1990s, when Singapore started moving towards knowledge-intensive industries, it became apparent that the attributes of initiative, creativity and entrepreneurship were not exactly abundant supply in our young people.

It was against this backdrop that I received a call in late 1997, some 15 years ago, to see Dr Tony Tan, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister-in-Charge of Higher Education. I had been an armchair critic of what I considered to be an overly rigid educational system, so it came as a total surprise when he asked me to head up a new university.

The only thing I still recall from our conversation was the word “different”. Dr Tan wanted a different kind of university from our two existing universities. I had to infer that since I was one of the most unlikely candidates to start a new university, “different” was a polite way of describing my lack of qualifications.

I literally was given a blank sheet of paper on which to start a new university. There was no White Paper produced by a blue-ribbon committee of experts. There was only Dr Tan giving me guidance in bits and pieces, not expounding in one go his grand vision, but sharing with me his views on tertiary education in Singapore, as he considered changing proposals. The various concept papers that finally led to SMU as it is today should be kept in our library archives, if we can find them. They will provide interesting reading on how any start-up goes through very different permutations before a final business model is adopted.

I hope that our early pioneering faculty will also give to the library their various photos of SMU as it evolved. For example, SMU’s pioneering faculty and management were housed in small cubicles on the ground floor of Nanyang Tree’s offices. The first batch of undergraduates occupied a temporary structure – now torn down – in the car park of the Bukit Timah campus. We then occupied Bukit Timah campus for a few years until the beautiful city campus was completed.

Dr Tony Tan encouraged us to be different. He emphasized the idea that SMU be a public-funded but autonomous university, governed not like a statutory board but more like an institution of public character. That is now the model for the other universities.

When we decided to be audacious and to award our own degrees from the outset rather than seek a joint degree with the Wharton School, Dr Tan supported us. When we wanted to have social science and law schools rather than just business, he encouraged us.

Dr Tan’s guidance has enabled us to grow rapidly in a short span of time and do many things differently – from university governance to staff recruitment to the way we admit students holistically.

Some observers have said that SMU has redefined the university landscape in Singapore in the last decade. We have been dubbed a “change agent” and a catalyst for innovation.

SMU was founded upon the vision of being a public-funded but autonomous university, governed not like a statutory board but more like an institution of public character. That is now the model for the other universities. And it is, according to various publications, Singapore’s premier research university, one of the top 200 universities in the world and a world leader in its own right. I hope that our early pioneering faculty will also give to the library their various photos of SMU as it evolved. For example, SMU’s pioneering faculty and management were housed in small cubicles on the ground floor of Nanyang Tree’s offices. The first batch of undergraduates occupied a temporary structure – now torn down – in the car park of the Bukit Timah campus. We then occupied Bukit Timah campus for a few years until the beautiful city campus was completed.

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