‘Lessons for Singapore’ from building SMU

One is the importance of keeping an open mind, says its new patron President Tan

By Rachel Chang

THE successful establishment of the Singapore Management University (SMU) holds lessons for Singapore, said President Tony Tan Keng Yam yesterday. These are the importance of keeping an open mind and being prepared to take a fresh, even unconventional, approach — provided the groundwork is thoroughly laid down.

These traits, along with strong support from the Government, paved the way for the setting up of SMU in 1998 — a third university that broke the mould and ultimately catalysed changes in Singapore’s higher education scene.

Dr Tan said this in a 90-minute recording for SMU’s oral history project, launched yesterday at the celebration of the university’s 12th Patron’s Day.

In his contribution to its oral history, Dr Tan recalled that through his career, he was always asked by the Government to “look after university education”.

When it became clear in the late 1990s that Singapore needed a third university to meet demand, his view was that “rather than simply establishing another university, we should take the opportunity to further develop our university sector — provide differentiation, provide variety, provide new directions”.

Hence, SMU would be fundamentally different from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

First, it was based on the American style of small, interactive classes, with admission criteria that went beyond grades, and a broad-based curriculum.

It would also be a not-for-profit corporation, rather than a statutory board like NUS and NTU — giving it autonomy in admission criteria, fees and faculty salary.

Students were pushed to speak up and think on their feet; class participation accounted for up to 30 per cent of marks for some courses.

The new university would become a change agent in the landscape of higher education.

NUS and NTU subsequently evolved into privately-run universities, and their pedagogy and admissions criteria also changed to keep up with the competition.

Yesterday, SMU founding chairman Ho Kwon Ping said that was Dr Tan’s intention from the start: “I was always aware that he saw us as the catalyst for the radical changes he wanted to make in Singapore’s university system.”

SMU president Arnoud de Meyer also paid tribute to Dr Tan’s role as “the driving force of the renewal of Singapore’s higher education landscape”.

Recalling his reaction to Dr Tan’s vision for SMU in the late 1990s, he said: “I certainly thought his ideas were ‘different’ and ‘bold’ — in fact, I thought them possibly over-ambitious. How glad I am that I was wrong.”

In his oral history contribution, Dr Tan recalled two factors that prompted SMU for success.

One, its focus on business and management tapped into Singapore’s status as a business hub. Two, its site on prime land in the city, a move that Cabinet had to be persuaded to make, he said.

At the celebrations yesterday, a delighted Mr Ho welcomed Dr Tan to a “homecoming”.

In 1996, Dr Tan, then deputy prime minister — had called him into his office and said Singapore needed a “different” university, recalled Mr Ho.

“SMU started without a White Paper written by a committee of expert educators. The Ministry of Education was not even really that involved. It was Dr Tan giving guidance directly to me and a handful of pioneers who really didn’t have a road map, only a vague destination.”

In the years since, Dr Tan has deemed from every honours the university has tried to bestow on him, said Mr Ho.

“It is therefore through a fortunate quirk of history that through his election as President of Singapore, our inspiration — founder can now be officially associated with SMU as our official patron.”

Strategy consultant David Tann, 34, among SMU’s first students in 2000, said yesterday: “We were at the cutting edge of business education.

“It was exciting and inspiring to be part of the experiment, seeing it evolve. And it was a successful one.”