

State of the University Address 10 Oct 2008:

CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATION

Mr Zainul Abidin, Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Your Excellency Mr Juan Cordero, Ambassador of the Republic of Costa

Rica, and Mrs Cordero

NUS Pro-Chancellors

NUS Board of Trustees

Professor Shih Choon Fong, NUS President, and Mrs Shih

Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Students, Alumni

Ladies and Gentlemen

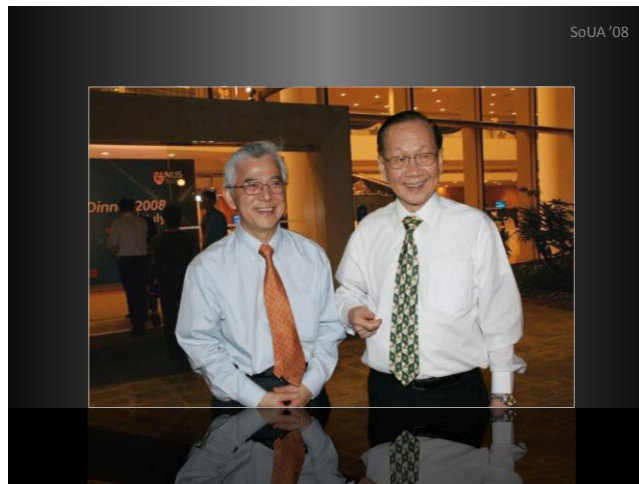
Giving the State of the University Address today is a privilege which is very special for me, an NUS alumnus and President-designate of NUS. It is a great honour for me to be entrusted with leading this remarkable institution. I thank the Board of Trustees and the University for your confidence and support.

Tribute to Professor Shih and Professor Lim Pin

Professor Shih Choon Fong and Professor Lim Pin, two outstanding leaders, have made NUS what it is today. Professor Lim Pin built strong foundations and many peaks during his tenure as Vice Chancellor. Professor Shih made NUS a widely-respected global university, with his singular focus on global standards of excellence, with his vision of globalised education, research and university partnerships, and through his many innovative initiatives.

Just yesterday, the latest World University Rankings by the Times Higher Education-QS placed our University at 30th in the world's top 200 universities, and 4th in Asia.

Thanks to Professor Shih and Professor Lim Pin, NUS is now well poised to make the leap to become a leading global university.



This will require boldness and resolve.

To succeed, we cannot just take small incremental steps.

Instead we must strive to make a quantum leap to bring NUS into the distinguished league of the world's great universities.

NUS and the art of Chinese landscape painting

Amateur Chinese landscape painters like myself, know that one of the most difficult situations is when the painting you are working on, starts looking really good.



It is paradoxical but this is the most dangerous period as you continue the painting. There is a great temptation to play it safe, to make incremental, timid strokes for fear of spoiling the picture. Such an approach usually fails. You often end up with a

piece of art which is commonplace, which has fallen short of what it could have become.

The test for the painter, therefore, is to continue to be bold in developing the painting, while placing each new stroke firmly and strategically. Even the parts which already please the eye can be further enhanced, and refreshing the composition can positively transform the painting.

Imagine, then, NUS as a landscape painting. We, members of the NUS community, are the artists, some of the best artists available! Our task is to build on the parts of NUS that are already excellent, while remaining bold and creative as we transform the wonderful painting that is our University.

Some of you may ask: Is it really possible for us to create a masterpiece? Do we have the wherewithal to make NUS a great university?

It is indeed true that NUS faces many challenges. The landscape is fiercely competitive. We have to balance many competing demands for our resources. We do have to make difficult choices and trade-offs. This is particularly so as the current global financial crisis continues to unfold. Growth in Singapore and around the world has slowed drastically. We are in for a period of turbulence ahead but hope that this will be short-lived.

These constraints and challenges are real, but they must not detract from our self-belief in our own potential.

From my recent discussions with colleagues, I know that many of you share my conviction. That NUS can be a leading global university if we put our hearts and minds fully into it – if we, as a community, wholeheartedly commit to a vision that stretches us to surpass ourselves. This will provide the impetus to find new solutions, and the strength and resources to address our challenges. Otherwise, we would not do full justice to our true potential. Otherwise, our painting would fall short of what it could have become.

Transforming NUS: People, Excellence, Striving to be self-surpassing

The question is where do we start? What is the most important thing that we must focus on?

For me the answer is simple.

It's all about PEOPLE – being single-minded about developing, retaining and recruiting top quality people, and creating a culture that brings out the best in them.

Many of us will remember the late Professor SS Ratnam.

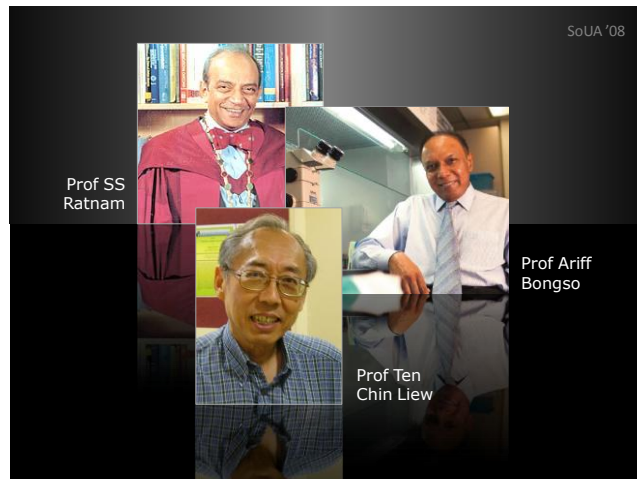
As Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology from 1970 to 1995, he assembled an outstanding team of clinicians and researchers who scored many firsts. Among others, the first in Asia to successfully use frozen embryos in assisted reproduction treatment; and the world's first baby to be conceived by micro-insemination sperm transfer. His legacy lives on today in the groundbreaking work that continues to come from the Department. Professor Ariff Bongso, for example, has won international accolades for his seminal research on human embryonic stem cells.

Remember that all these were achieved at a time when research resources were a fraction of what they are today. What was the secret of Professor Ratnam's success? When I was a junior doctor, I talked to him once about a research idea. Half-expecting to be given a polite brush-off, I was won over by his enthusiasm and obvious interest in guiding a clueless young colleague.

I left that encounter feeling energised.

Professor Ratnam was truly passionate about people. He recruited faculty who were more accomplished than himself, and excited those around him to shoot for goals which seem unattainable.

The same can be said of Professor Ten Chin Liew. As a Philosophy professor and previous Head of Department, he is well known as a mentor who gives generously of his time and ideas. This has helped many younger colleagues to make their mark as scholars.



There are many similar inspiring examples in our other Faculties. Each of them demonstrates the same passion to develop, retain and recruit top quality people, and to create a culture that brings out the best in them. The challenge for us now is how to make this the norm *throughout all* of NUS.

What will this entail? Let me present some scenarios:

Today, if we have a promising faculty member, would we as peers and senior colleagues help him to become an even better teacher and researcher than ourselves?

If a young Associate Professor gains high international recognition as a scholar, would we push for promotion to full Professor despite the person's youth? Do we genuinely encourage and reward our faculty who stretch themselves to stand out?

For each position we fill, do we target people who are among the top in their field, or who have the potential to be so? Do we bring in new people who are more accomplished than ourselves?

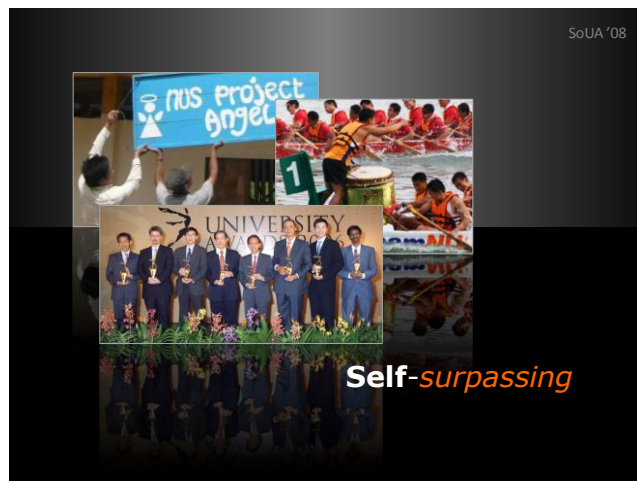
If an administrative staff member shows ability and passion, will the person be encouraged to grow by taking on bigger, more challenging roles in the university? Or will the department hold the person back to meet its own needs?

I could give more examples, but the point is this:

The transformation of NUS requires the transformation in our culture, the way we see and do things. We need a culture that fiercely values excellence and brings out the very best in our people.

Within such a culture, we recruit outstanding individuals and help our colleagues to excel because this raises overall quality and standards. Within such a culture, we are keen to collaborate across disciplines because by doing so, we are more likely to do something exceptional. We applaud the attainments of individuals, and celebrate the achievements of cooperative efforts within NUS.

There is a term which I believe captures the spirit essential to this culture transformation. The term is “SELF-SURPASSING”.



Self-surpassing because as individuals, as teams, as an institution, we are never satisfied with what we have achieved. We are always seeking to surpass ourselves. I was chatting with some of our student sportsmen last month and picked up a valuable insight from them. They told me that their sporting performance went up when they focused, for each event, on surpassing themselves rather than on beating their competitors.

A quartet of initiatives centred on People

So how would we transform the culture in NUS?

There is a Chinese saying that roughly translates like this: “To talk much and arrive nowhere, is the same as climbing a tree to catch a fish”.

To develop, recruit and retain top quality people, is tough. To be constantly self-surpassing is even harder. If we are to succeed in this, ALL of us must act on it, and not just talk about it.

The good news is that over the past few years, we have made great strides in this direction. Today I would like to announce four new thrusts to be launched next year, which I believe will quicken the pace of progress.

First, strong commitment from our leadership.

The NUS leadership will make the development, retention and recruitment of excellent faculty, staff and students our key deliverable. This would apply to the President, Provost, Deputy Presidents, to Deans, Directors and Heads. Our effectiveness and impact will be assessed with this as a major parameter. At the same time, we will refine the way we recognise quality and achievement. In particular, to better acknowledge scholarly achievement in multidisciplinary areas; and to recognise the contributions of individuals to collaborative work of high impact.

Second, transform our administrative culture and systems.

The key to this is talented executive and professional staff, empowered to make system-wide changes. To be a leading university, our administrative culture and systems should be among the best-in-class. They must be rigorous and professional, yet enabling for the academic enterprise. We will launch special programmes to nurture first-rate administrative staff and to adapt best practices from overseas.

Third, enhance faculty support.

We will actively encourage more of our faculty to pursue "high risk, high impact" research. A "New Research Horizons Award" will be created. This Award will fund faculty with unconventional research ideas with the potential to make exciting breakthroughs. The goal is to support faculty whose research can help define thinking in the field, whose work can open up new lines of inquiry. For this to occur, the NUS community would need to encourage and recognise novel research ideas particularly when these go against accepted thinking. We should take inspiration from Dr Harald zur Hausen. Dr zur Hausen was one of the winners of this year's Nobel Prize in Medicine. Very few people believed that a virus could be the cause of cancer of the cervix. But this did not deter Dr zur Hausen who proved that this was indeed the case.

Alongside our researchers, our faculty who innovate and excel in teaching are equally important. Inspiring teachers who have a genuine interest in students are vital for NUS. We will be enhancing professional development support and mentorship for them.

Fourth, recruit world leaders in our strategic academic areas.

We will make a concerted effort to seek out and recruit top-rate faculty in strategic areas. A standing search committee chaired by the Provost will be established to lead in this effort. These new faculty will help NUS find new pathways to distinction, in both research and teaching.

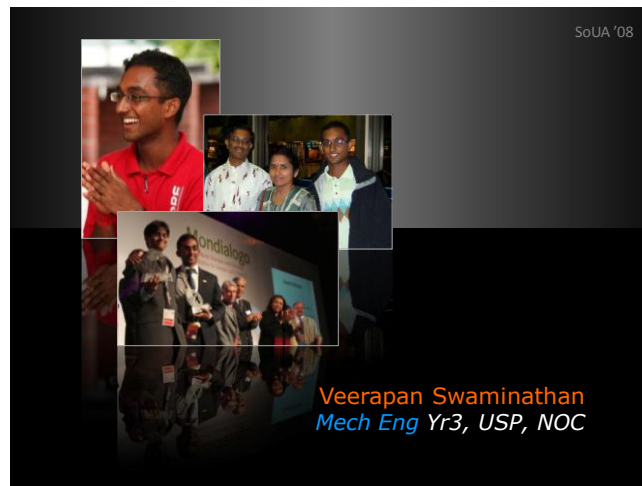
Compelling value propositions to attract and educate the best students

Talented faculty and staff, and a culture that truly values excellence. These are powerful ingredients for a distinctive educational experience. One which will attract high quality students to NUS and provide them with unparalleled opportunities to learn, and to grow intellectually and as individuals.

In NUS, we want our students to become thinking individuals with questioning minds. Global citizens, effective in diverse cultural settings. Constructive members and leaders of our community.

How does this educational philosophy work out in practice?

To illustrate, let me introduce you to Veerappan Swaminathan. Veera is a third-year Mechanical Engineering student in our University Scholars Programme. A Singaporean whose mother is an Indian national, Veera studied Mandarin in school.



Veera found that NUS gave him many opportunities to participate in international programmes. He told us that these helped him develop a great sense of adventure and discovery. So, last year, Veera and his team decided to compete for the Mondialogo Engineering Award 2007 organised by UNESCO. They had to develop a technology for farmers in rural India that uses solar energy to store fruits and vegetables for a longer time. Although he described this undertaking as “knowingly walking into what was a big unknown”, Veera’s team emerged as winners. Their cash prize of €20,000 provided seed-funding to pursue the project further, to offer the technology to more villages in India.

Veera put his linguistic skills to good use as a delegate in the Sino-Singapore Undergraduate Exchange Program. He is currently immersed in entrepreneurship activities in our NUS Overseas College in Silicon Valley.

Veera’s experience exemplifies the transformative educational experience NUS is providing our students. I am really proud that NUS has nurtured students like Veera, who are willing to venture into the unknown, and yet have a strong sense of

feeling for the community. It gives me confidence that we are on the right track with our new educational programmes.

Over the past 10 years, we have made fundamental changes to NUS' undergraduate education. In particular, we have pioneered new models of global education. For example, we have many joint and double-degree programmes with top universities around the world. Twenty percent of our undergraduates spend six months or more overseas on exchange programmes. The NUS Overseas Colleges provide a unique experiential entrepreneurship education. Many students have told me that participating in NOC was a "life-transforming experience". Indeed NOC has done well. NOC students have set up 28 companies and, I was happy to note, also started 4 not-for-profit organisations that reach out to other students and expand networking opportunities.

NUS' innovative programmes give our students an extra edge. We will clearly continue to build on them.

Looking ahead, however, we have to ask ourselves this question: how would we take NUS' education to the next level?

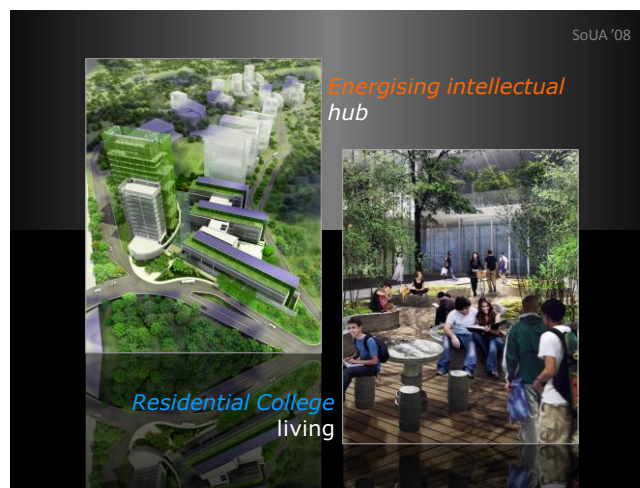
What is the quantum leap we should endeavor to make in the NUS educational experience? What new value propositions can we create for our students?

The new NUS University Town is a historic opportunity for us to make such a quantum leap. For me, University Town will have 2 distinct but intertwined dimensions: These are residential learning in our Residential Colleges, and University Town as an energising intellectual hub.

Imagine you are an NUS student in 2011 who has just been admitted into a Residential College in University Town. With the same small group of fellow students, you explore subjects of global importance through the modules taken in your college. Your college mates are from very diverse disciplines, cultures and nationalities. Talking to them, you realise there are many different ways to look at an issue, and you learn how to handle differences in viewpoints. The many co-

curricular activities in college challenge you to get out of your comfort zone, and develop as individuals and leaders.

Picture University Town itself as an energising hub, full of interesting people: Numerous NUS students not staying in the colleges but taking classes in University Town. Many international students from the four corners of the earth. A large number of graduate students in a mind-boggling range of disciplines. Top NUS Professors, many from NUS' Asia Research Institute. World-class researchers from MIT and ETH Zurich working in the CREATE campus within University Town.



Business and community leaders from Singapore and beyond drawn by the vibrant intellectual and cultural programmes.

Imagine an environment where learning is not confined to classrooms, but which also occurs informally through interactions with the rich mix of people you are constantly bumping into.

The picture I have sketched epitomises our vision to transform NUS education. Residential College learning will provide intense interactive learning in small groups that are maintained over a prolonged period of time. University Town will be an energising intellectual and social hub. It will further intensify the rich multi-cultural interactions that characterise NUS.

Besides University Town, we will be developing other physical hubs that will play a similar and complementary role. This year, we freed up a large amount of space in and around Yusof Ishak House. This will be remodelled for student activities and interaction. At the request of the NUS Students Union, we will also be extending the covered space at the Forum this year to allow more students to interact.



So, founded on rigour, unmatched in its diversity, distinctive in its global and Asian perspectives, residential learning and University Town will help us develop the educational experience for tomorrow, one that will equip and challenge our graduates to make a difference in a globalised world full of opportunities and uncertainties.

Our Alumni, the third pillar of the NUS Community

With the enhanced educational experience at NUS, we are seeing more and more of our young graduates returning as active young alumni. Together with our dedicated senior alumni, they are contributing in diverse ways to the richness of the NUS community.

Today, our alumni form the third pillar which holds our University proudly up, joining the other two pillars formed by our faculty and staff, and our students.

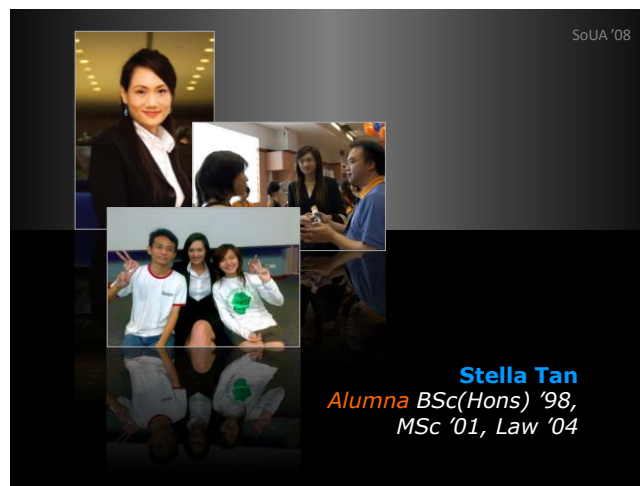
Some of you may have read a newspaper report in August, on the state of alumni-giving to the local universities. It highlighted that only 2.5% of NUS alumni made donations to the university.

I accept there is much to be done to reach out and connect with our alumni. However, beyond donations, I feel that there has already been a sea-change in NUS' relationship with our alumni. For this, we owe much to the tireless efforts of Professor Shih, and our alumni partners: NUSS, the Alumni Advisory Board, our 43 NUS alumni groups, and our 14 overseas alumni chapters.

Increasing numbers of NUS alumni are coming forward, to reconnect and to contribute to NUS. They are giving generously of their time and expertise, and providing support for important causes throughout the university.

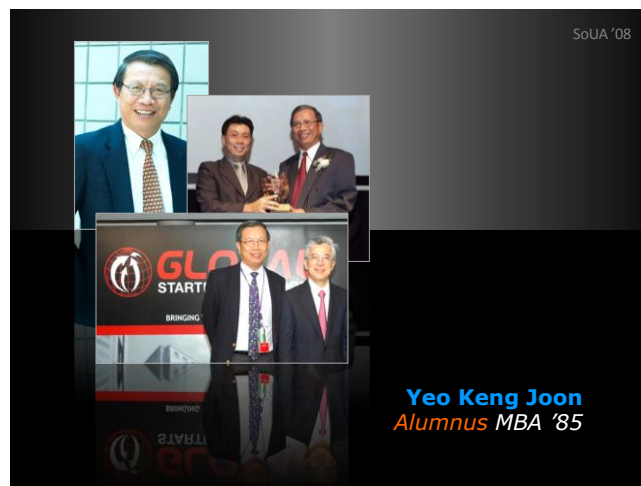
I would like to mention 3 alumni who have really inspired me.

Both the Faculties of Science and Law proudly claim Ms Stella Tan as their alumnus. Stella is a Deputy Public Prosecutor at the Attorney-General's Chambers. She holds three degrees from NUS, two from Science and one from Law (BSc (Hons) '98, MSc '01, Law '04). The Dean of Science told me that Stella is such a major force in the Faculty's outreach programmes and alumni events. She also contributes her expertise by teaching forensic science, as an Adjunct Associate Professor in NUS. In this, Stella proved to be a stellar teacher.

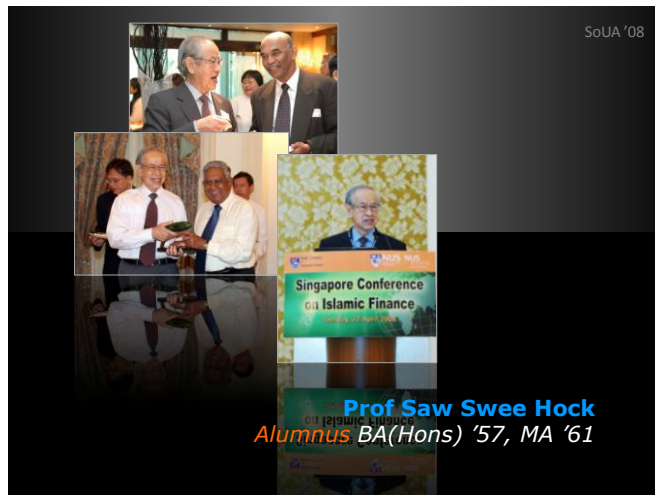


Mr Yeo Keng Joon (MBA '85) is another remarkable alumnus. I first met Keng Joon about 5 years ago. What struck me immediately was his infectious passion for students. Each year, since 1999, our Business School students organise the Startup@Singapore business plan competition and forum, a major event with

competitors from around the world. Every year without fail, since 1999, Keng Joon is there actively advising and supporting the students. More recently, Keng Joon also formed a group of Business School alumni who have raised over \$500,000 (including matching government grants) to support bursaries at the School. Our NUS Business School is indeed fortunate to have many ardent alumni like Keng Joon whose support has been invaluable.



An eminent alumnus who has contributed to many different aspects of our university is Professor Saw Swee Hock (BA (Hons) '57, MA '61). Swee Hock's big-hearted philanthropy has made possible, among other things, the establishment of the Saw Centre for Financial Studies at the Business School, the Saw Swee Hock Centennial Professorship at the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and numerous scholarships and bursaries. But, Swee Hock's contributions go far beyond this. Most of you may know that Swee Hock is not only a prominent alumnus, but also a distinguished scholar. I enjoy talking with Swee Hock about the conferences he is helping the Saw Centre for Financial Studies to put together. I can tell you he has a great eye for top talent. I remember several occasions when he personally identified world-class speakers and helped to bring them to NUS. On top of all this, Swee Hock also gives freely of his time, talent and experience as an active member of the NUS Board of Trustees.



As you can see, our alumni “software” is gathering in strength. And so too is the “hardware”. Early next year, a new milestone will be reached. The new Alumni Complex, comprising the Shaw Foundation Alumni House and the redeveloped NUS Kent Ridge Guild House, will be open. The brainchild of Professor Shih, the Alumni complex will be a focal point for the 186,000 NUS alumni around the world to connect with our University.



I am happy and proud to be an NUS alumnus. For the Class of '83, 15 November 2008 is a red-letter day. On that day, we will be having our 25th anniversary bash on campus. In preparation, I looked up my old photo albums the other day. My first shock was how terrible my hairstyle was then and I am not showing a photo today!

But after I got over that, there were some priceless gems. Here is a photo from KE VII Hall; we were all helping to look for a pet tortoise that had run away. I am looking forward to 15 November. It would be great talking about the wonderful

things we used to do as students. Also I would like to check on what happened to that tortoise in the end.

Recently I caught up with four of the six Class of '83 alumni who had stepped forward to organise the event. Perry Hee, Chan Soke Kuin, Lim Swee Keng, Kingston Sia, Tan Bee Tee, and Aileen Bong. They told me they had volunteered because they wanted to help reconnect their fellow alumni to their alma mater. In the course of their work, they discovered, to their delight, the tremendous changes in NUS that they had not known about. I was very touched and heartened by their enthusiasm and commitment to their alma mater.

I am sure that throughout NUS, there are many, many stories similar to the ones I have shared. Together, they are helping us to build a common sense of pride, inspiring our alumni to feel an important part of the NUS community, to enjoy the vibrancy of NUS and to give back to the next generation.

Differentiating NUS: A leading global university, centred in Asia

I had earlier used the metaphor of NUS as a wonderful landscape painting full of great promise and potential. The painting has many beautiful parts and we stand now with our brushes, seeking to make it a masterpiece.

How should we continue the painting?

How would we make our painting really stand out, to have great impact, compared with the countless other paintings being done all round the world?

Let's start by looking at 3 paintings.

The first is a painting of a bowl of flowers. Can you guess who the painter is?

The second is a painting of couples walking in a park. This is done by the same artist as before. Who do you think it is?

The third is a painting of a starry night by the same painter.

I think all of you would recognise this painting instantly as a masterpiece by Vincent Van Gogh.

Each of the 3 paintings is outstanding. But it is hard to tell who the painter is from the first 2 paintings because they are very similar to other paintings done in those styles.

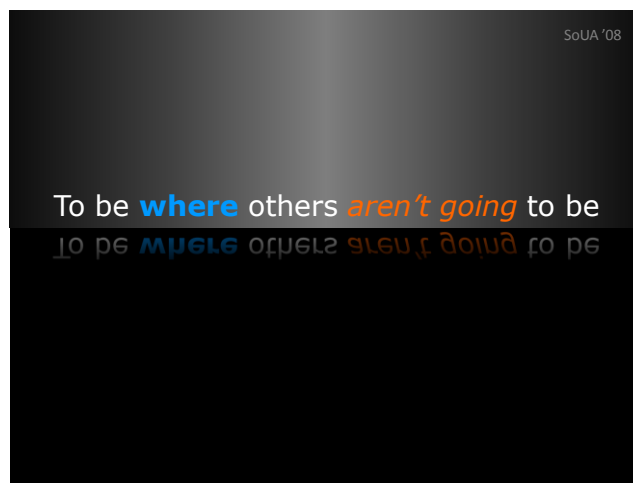
The third painting however, is completely unmistakable. Unmistakable and unique in its composition, the swirling effect of the sky and stars, and the bold use of the brush. It is arresting, powerful and fresh, and stands out by being completely distinctive.

Throughout his life, Van Gogh relentlessly pursued his own unique way of expressing himself through his paintings. Today, he is revered for the power, originality and distinctiveness of his later paintings.

So, what has this discussion about Van Gogh's painting style got to do with NUS?

Van Gogh created powerful paintings quite unlike anything done by his contemporaries and predecessors.

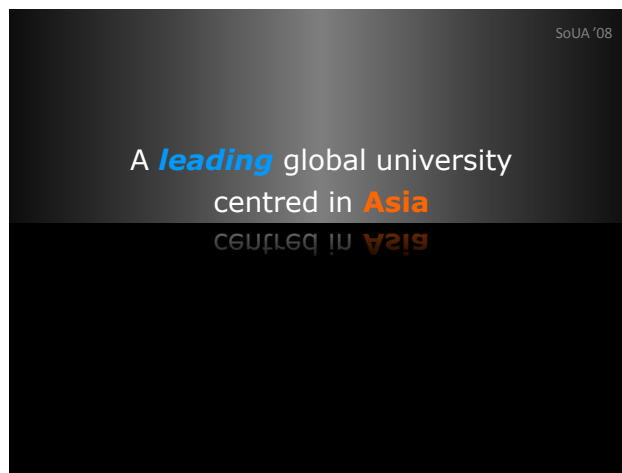
His approach holds an important lesson for us. To be a leading global university, NUS must achieve high impact in our education, research and service. But we must also create our own distinctiveness. *To "be where others aren't going to be".*



How would NUS differentiate itself in an intensely competitive global higher education landscape?

Having talented faculty, students and staff and a culture that fiercely values excellence are essential. But we need to go beyond these. I believe we should also distinguish NUS by positioning ourselves as a leading global university, *centred* in Asia.

What does it mean to be a leading global university, centred in Asia?



There are many dimensions to this.

First, our students should gain a strong appreciation of global issues, alongside perspectives from Asia. NUS would innovate new models of global education, in collaboration with overseas partners. In particular, we will work within our key global networks such as the International Alliance of Research Universities and the Association of Pacific Rim Universities.

Second, we should have world-class faculty in strategic academic areas, who also have special expertise in relation to India, China, Southeast Asia and other parts of Asia.

Third, as Singapore's National University, we will provide Singaporeans with the best university education, and support Singapore's development. Leveraging on Singapore's strengths, NUS should be a preferred partner for scholars and industry

seeking partnerships in Asia. We must be a magnet for talent from within and outside Asia.

Finally, NUS should be influential in thought-leadership in issues of global import and to reflect Asian views and perspectives.

NUS Global-Asia Institute

NUS already has much expertise which relates to Asia. Our capabilities span a large number of disciplines from biomedical sciences to business; from social sciences to public policy.

However, we lack a university-level platform that can tackle really *large-scale* research issues which are important globally as well as in Asia. Such research deals with complex and interlinked questions, often beyond the scope of existing research centres.

To address this, I am proposing to set up an NUS Global-Asia Institute. The institute should bring together relevant expertise in creative ways to study large-scale research issues. Its research will not just cover single countries, but will also examine the interplay and interactions between the key countries of Asia, for example between China and India. A task force of leading faculty has been formed to recommend how such an institute might best work.

The NUS Global-Asia Institute has the potential to be a unique and high-impact flagship initiative. It will complement existing NUS programmes that already have a significant Asian component. Together, these would help us become a university that is influential in thought-leadership on global matters, and their relevance to Asia.

A call to action

And so we continue the unfinished painting that is NUS. Our vision of NUS must be painted with bold, assured strokes. We must break fresh new ground while continuing to enhance the best parts of NUS.

As members of the NUS community, I invite you to take up your brush and add to our collective effort to create a lively but harmonious piece of art.

NUS is well poised to make the leap to become a leading global university. Despite the constraints and challenges we face, we must have self-belief in our own potential. To succeed, we need boldness and resolve.

The key is our people. We must be single-minded about developing, retaining and recruiting top quality people. Create a culture of excellence that brings out the best in our people. Encourage the whole university community to be self-surpassing.

Never satisfied with what we have achieved. Always seeking to surpass ourselves.

But this will not be enough. We must also create our own distinctiveness. To “be where others aren’t going to be”.

I believe we can do this, that we can distinguish ourselves by becoming a leading global university centred in Asia.

Paraphrasing a quote from John M. Richardson, Jr:

*“When it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people:
those who make it happen,
those who let it happen,
and those who wonder what happened.”*

We are at a pivotal moment in time.

We have a unique opportunity to transform NUS into a leading global university.

To create a community of talented faculty, staff, students and alumni who are constantly seeking to be self-surpassing.

To develop compelling new educational value propositions that would make NUS education distinctive.

To create the energising intellectual environment that is the hallmark of great universities.

Ask yourself what you want your University to be.

What is your vision for the future for NUS in our quest to be amongst the great universities of the world.

And then, be one of the people who will help make that future happen.

