

**Speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President, National University of Singapore
Commencement 2012
Thursday, 5th July, 2012, at 11 am at University Cultural Centre**

A century of achievement and contribution

NUS Chancellor, President Tony Tan Keng Yam and Mrs Mary Tan

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Law, Mr K Shanmugam

Our Honorary Doctorate Recipient Mr S R Nathan,

NUS Pro-Chancellors

NUS Chairman and Trustees

Distinguished Guests

Graduands, Parents and Families

Alumni and Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen

To the graduating class of 2012, my heartiest congratulations!

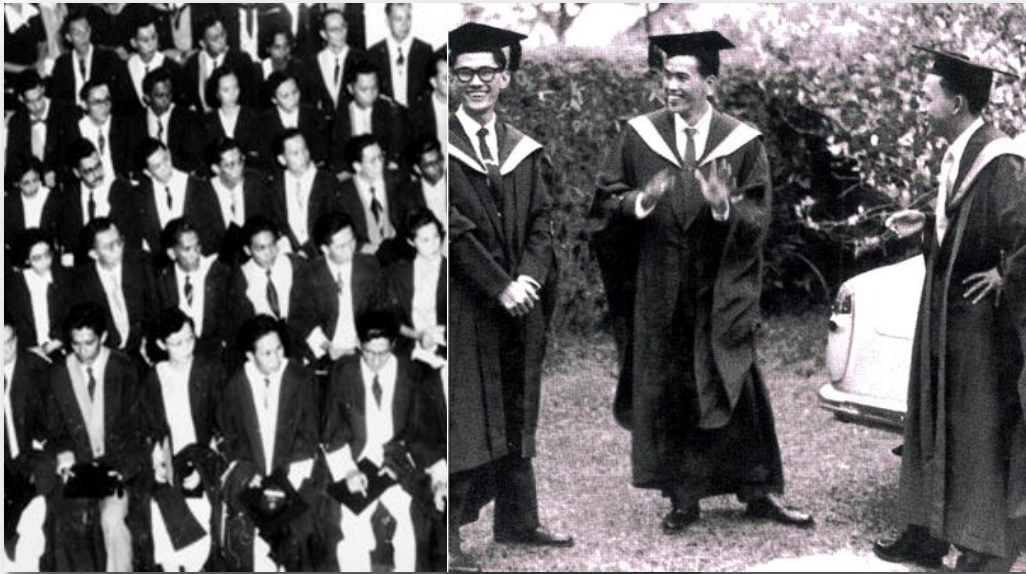
We are delighted to celebrate this special day with you, your parents and loved ones, to mark your achievements and the fruits of your hard work.

For most of you, this is your first ever Commencement. But this year's ceremony is also very special as it is the 100th graduation ceremony of our University, and hence of higher education in Singapore.

The first graduation ceremony was held on 31 May 1910, when seven graduates received their diplomas at the tiny campus of the *Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Medical School*, from which NUS traces its roots.



Since that time, the form of our graduation ceremony has evolved considerably. For example, the gowns that our graduates are wearing today, were first adopted by our university in 1951. They are patterned after those used by academia in Europe in the Middle Ages. Interestingly, the original purpose of the gown was to distinguish students from members of the town, largely for the purpose of spotting truant behaviour, such as, for Oxford, visiting “public houses” or pubs which students were banned from doing in those times. I'm sure that for those of you who have read Harry Potter, you would be familiar with this.



Today, however, academic gowns serve a different purpose, being a vital part of the colour and pageantry which make our commencement ceremonies so vivid and memorable. The term “Commencement” itself was adopted by our university in 2001, to underscore that for our graduates, it marks the start of a new journey, as you venture forth into the world.



The world that you are heading out into is complex and globalised, yet full of rich and exciting possibilities. I am confident that as NUS graduates, you will engage the world with commitment, passion and humility.

You have the ability and potential not just to fulfil your own aspirations, but to make significant and lasting contributions to your profession, our society and the world beyond.

This tradition of service to the wider community is a central element in our university's rich history. It features prominently in the graduation speeches that have been given over the last 100 years.

This morning, the convergence of three happy events allows me to give further colour to this tradition and ideal.

Firstly, we are recognising today, the remarkable contributions and example of our former President and Chancellor, Mr S R Nathan.



Mr S R Nathan
Class of '52

Mr Nathan's distinguished record as a civil servant, ambassador, and statesman is an inspiration to all of us. It is NUS' great honour to be conferring an Honorary Doctor of Letters on an individual who has contributed so much to Singapore.

Mr Nathan's life and work exemplifies many key values, but I would like to just highlight one, and that is "dedication to service". As a young civil service officer during the early, chaotic days of Singapore's independence, Mr Nathan was constantly tested by vexing challenges and circumstances. Once, during the labour unrest of the 1960s, Dr Goh Keng Swee told him

that the consequence of failure would be that “you and I will be put on the Padang and shot”¹. Despite being told this, Mr Nathan did not shirk this heavy responsibility, knowing that the outcome often meant hope and better lives for those he served.

The term “dedication to service” evokes a wide range of responses. Some may even think it is a rather quaint notion, out-of-step with our times.

I feel that it is really quite the opposite: “dedication to service” can be a powerful motivator that helps us to press on despite the odds. This springs from the realisation that one’s actions can have very positive consequences to the wider community beyond one’s self.

Mr Nathan first entered our university in 1952.



Mr S R Nathan – back row, far right

¹ (Nathan, 2011). Nathan, S. R. (2011). Winning against the odds: The labour research unit in NTUC's founding. (p. 47). Singapore : Straits Times Press

The Diploma in Social Studies was a special programme designed to allow mature students whose studies were disrupted by the War.

This brings me to the second, happy event we are celebrating this year, which is the 60th anniversary of our Social Work Department. From the very start, our Social Work Department has been at the forefront of dedicating itself to serving disadvantaged persons and communities. A full detailing of the department's many contributions would take too long. Hence, I will allude to these through the work of two well-known members of the department.

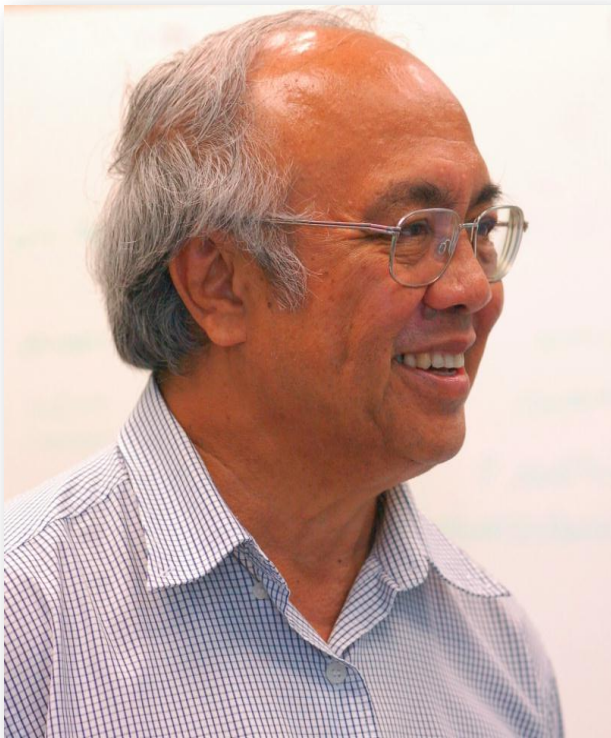
Mrs Ann Wee, the former head of Department, is now a self-described OPWA – “Old Person with Attitude”. Since she arrived in Singapore in 1950, she has become “a walking encyclopaedia on Singapore’s social welfare landscape”. She was responsible for training generations of dedicated social work graduates, including Mr Nathan himself.



Mrs Ann Wee, third from right, front row

As the Department matured, its graduates went on to become not only practitioners, but also academics and leaders in our community.

Dr S Vasoo, also a former student of Ann Wee, went on to become a Member of Parliament (MP) for 17 years. As an MP, from 1984 to 2001, he was particularly known for his empathy and championing of the poor and underprivileged in society. In 1983, Dr Vasoo played a key role in the setting-up of the Community Chest, the fund-raising arm of the National Council of Social Service.



Dr S Vasoo

Member of Parliament, 1984 – 2001

Class of '66

Our Social Work Department can be justly proud of its achievements, and the positive impact that its alumni have made over the past 60 years. Successive generations of its graduates have taken on new challenges,

willingly and with strength of purpose. Despite the rapid evolution of Singaporean society, they remained closely engaged, and constantly adapted to meet changing needs. Their dedication speaks powerfully of their passion and commitment.

The Department has therefore much to celebrate this year.

As part of the celebrations, I am pleased to announce that the Department will be launching the S R Nathan Professorship in Social Work. This Professorship will augment the Department's ongoing efforts to do even more to contribute to the development of Social Work in Singapore and beyond.

The third happy event, is that the graduating class at this ceremony is from the School of Design and Environment, which has a strong tradition of bringing practical benefits to the community. I will just share one such example.

Ms Selene Chew was a final year student at the School when she conceived of her project, "Blindspot". The project was later awarded the Grand Prix at the Netexplo 2012 Awards, which is supported by UNESCO.



Ms Selene Chew, Class of 2011

Ms Chew is the youngest person and the only Asian to ever win the award. Her project consisted of a “smart” cane, which incorporates a mobile phone, GPS, motion sensors, Bluetooth and social media to enable the visually impaired to expand their physical and social mobility.

I am heartened that the students and graduates of SDE, and of Schools across NUS, are keeping alive our university’s long tradition of “dedication to service”, of contributing to the wider community.

So, for our graduating class today, we wish you the very best as you seek out new opportunities and realise the promise of your potential. In the course of this, you will find fulfilment for yourself and your loved ones.

But also remember that your talent, creativity and passion can also be applied to the challenges of society, and help uplift and benefit those less advantaged than ourselves.

Allow me to once again congratulate you, our newest alumni, on your success at reaching this important milestone. We welcome you as the newest members of the NUS alumni family. As alumni, you will continue to be a vital part of our NUS community. You will always have a special place at NUS and we hope you will further deepen your links with your alma mater in the years ahead.

All the very best for a bright and successful future!

Thank you.

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