

Commencement Speech 2015

6 July 2015

Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President, National University of Singapore

NUS Chancellor, President Tony Tan Keng Yam

Pro-Chancellors

NUS Chairman and Trustees

Distinguished Honorary Graduands

Graduates, Parents and Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen

To the class of 2015, my very heartiest congratulations!

We are delighted to be able to share with you and your families, your pride and joy in the many achievements you have made, and your excitement for the future.

You graduate at a doubly auspicious time – in the year when Singapore celebrates its 50th year of independence and NUS marks its 110th anniversary.

To some, 110 might sound rather old.

And indeed, some of the things we remember with fondness come from early points in our history.

In 2010, we asked each Faculty to pick one “representative” object it would like to feature in our annual Desk Calendar. The Faculty of Dentistry rather predictably chose the dental chair which was used in the 1950s. I am told that the chair is very fiddly and that Dental students in those days, spent more time adjusting the chair than treating their patients.

For our graduating students at this morning's ceremony, the Business School picked this – in the 1970s, the standard office issue for our Professors included one typewriter, one trolley and 2 office trays made of rattan and wood but I am happy to report that we have made considerable progress and that today, NUS Professors actually get computers and laptops instead.

Looking beyond symbols like these, there are however two enduring traits from our University's founding in 1905 that continue to galvanise us today. These are the unrelenting pursuit of excellence, and our commitment to service and giving back to society.

I would also add that while NUS is 110 this year, at our core, we are still a vigorously youthful institution.

In recent years, we have pioneered many innovative programmes that have substantially enhanced the quality of our education and the impact of our research. They have also added greatly to our high international standing and established us as a key node in many major global knowledge networks.

In my view, it is this rich blend of enduring old and vigorous new qualities and innovations that enables our University to continue to excel, and to make a consequential impact.

The three individuals who honour us by accepting Honorary Doctorates from NUS today, illustrate this point well.

All three are global and admired leaders who have pursued and achieved true excellence in their chosen fields – ESM Goh Chok Tong as a political leader and international statesman; Professor Saw as an eminent academic with a strong impact on public policy; and Sir Richard as CEO and Chairman of GlaxoWellcome from 1995 to 2000, and after that, as Chairman of GlaxoSmithKline, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies.

These achievements by themselves are already highly admirable.

Yet, each of them also chose to give back directly to society, and in the course of doing so, has had an even wider transformative impact.

ESM Goh graduated from the University of Singapore in 1964. He was an exceptional student who achieved a rare first-class honours in Economics. He was attracted to academia and might have become Senior Professor Goh today but instead, he answered the call to serve, and entered politics. In his words:

“Those of us who have benefited disproportionately from society's investment in us owe the most to society, particularly to those who may not have had access to the same opportunities. We owe a debt to make lives better for all, and not just for ourselves.”

During his long public service career and particularly during his 14-year tenure as Prime Minister, he made numerous and outstanding contributions not just to the advancement of Singapore but to the improvement of the lives of generations of Singaporeans.

Turning to Sir Richard, he has given generously of his time, expertise and energy over a period of more than 15 years, to help start and then grow Singapore's health and biomedical sciences sector. He did so in a number of capacities, most notably as the first and current Chairman of the Biomedical Sciences International Advisory Council of Singapore. Sir Richard's signal contributions were recognized by the award of an honorary Singapore citizenship in 2004, but by that time he had already given much in selfless service to Singapore, to help realise a vision and goal that he believed in deeply.

As for Professor Saw Swee Hock, he was among those who entered university in the aftermath of World War II. He learnt first-hand how education can transform not just individual lives, but entire nations. Since then, he has dedicated his energy and resources to helping future generations of students to enjoy greater educational opportunities, and to support research directed to the betterment of society.

We at NUS are particularly appreciative of Prof Saw's leadership and many contributions to NUS' education and research – not just through his generous philanthropy but also his encouragement, wise counsel and active involvement in academic programmes.

I have had the immense privilege of working closely with ESM Goh, Sir Richard and Prof Saw.

Beyond their insistence on excellence and their dedication to service, what is really impressive is also their openness to new ideas, and strong interest in innovative approaches and solutions.

It is this combination of qualities, I believe, that have contributed to their success and their ability to make such a difference to the lives of others.

I am really pleased that the same spirit continues to burn brightly in our current students and graduates. I would like to just share one illustrative example:

David Hoe, an MOE Teaching Award recipient who graduates this year with a Bachelor of Social Sciences faced many challenges during his childhood. As a child, he had to help his visually-impaired mother sell tissue paper and tidbits to make a living. When she passed on, sadly, he focused on his studies, and progressed from Normal (Tech) to Junior College, and then NUS. The difficulties he faced during his childhood did not defeat him; instead they made him determined not only to succeed, but to help others from less privileged backgrounds to do better as well.

David is an active youth leader and the only student member of the national Taskforce on Youth and Drugs. He also launched the “I am Talented” (IAT) project, an innovative programme which pairs under-achieving students with university students who serve as academic and social mentors.

The interwoven stories of our University’s graduates and friends, past and present, reflect the spirit of the NUS community – we strive to do our best and to excel; we innovate; and we recognise that each of us is capable of making a difference not only for ourselves, but to others, our community and nation.

To the Class of 2015, I hope this spirit will serve you well as you embark on your own journey ahead. May your talent, strengths and dreams make this a journey filled with purpose, friendships and fulfilment, for yourselves, your families, and others.

All the very best from all of us in NUS and congratulations once again!