

**Speech by NUS President, Prof Tan Chorh Chuan
NUS Commencement Dinner, 24 July 2015**

Pro-Chancellors

Chairman and Trustees

NUSSU President

Distinguished Guests

Graduates, Alumni, Staff

Ladies and Gentlemen

Earlier this year, I was in San Francisco where I met some of our students attending the NUS Overseas College at Silicon Valley. At an event, one of the students asked me: “What do you actually do, as NUS President?”

I think his question sprang from curiosity, and not because I didn’t look as though I was working really very hard – with white hair and black racoon eyes.

But his question did lead me to reflect on the things that fill up my diary. There are of course the endless back-to-back meetings, and I want to stress that all of them are extremely useful, because most of them are called for by me.

By the way, if you leave those meetings aside, I guess the best way to typify my work is to say it is very diverse and there are very few dull moments.

So this evening I thought I would share some of the more interesting things that popped up in the course of work this year, our 110th Anniversary.

So Friday 10th July I received an email from Prof Peter Ng. It had this cryptic title “Return of the Whale”. So this turned out, of course, to be about the dead sperm whale which was spotted floating around Jurong Island. Peter’s email read “this should interest you, Chorh Chuan. We are now twisting and turning to see how we can get this whale into a place where we can clean it out.”

RETURN OF THE WHALE

Commencement
TWENTY.FIFTEEN



Then later he confirmed that “We are securing tissues and body parts for DNA and genetic work. Maybe gut contents as well. Then we secure the skeleton and we will display it somewhere somehow in the museum! As of this morning, part of the carcass has been processed. My team is there now. Let me know if you are curious enough to visit!”

So I was certainly very curious, but perhaps not curious enough for the prospect of seeing and smelling a dead whale being taken apart.

But Kudos to our passionate and intrepid colleagues from the NUS Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum!

All of this also felt just so providential!

Ever since Peter Ng and Leo Tan embarked on their remarkable work to build the Natural History Museum, the number one question they were asked all the time was “when will we get the whale back?” This was in reference to the huge whale skeleton in the old National Museum, which many of us would remember fondly from our school day visits.

So, as Peter Ng declared rightly, on Singapore’s 50th birthday, we have gotten a wonderful gift of a Jubilee Whale! Well done to Peter and his team!

Still on the theme of celebrating SG50 and NUS110, in April, we mounted a highly successful exhibition of our university's many major contributions to Singapore through the translation of our research. Titled "Building Our Nation through Science and Technology", the exhibition highlighted key innovations in health, sustainability, digital and multimedia sectors, and the Smart Nation initiative.

It started here at our UCC and then drew large crowds at VivoCity and Great World City because it went round on a travelling expedition. Some of you have seen the exhibits that were impressive displays of new medical devices and technologies, quantum cryptography and biosensors. But I must confess that I was particularly drawn to the robotic carp developed by our Faculty of Engineering. It, quite fascinatingly, could swim in 3-Dimensions like its natural counterparts and was in fact quite life-like. In fact, I overheard someone joking aside "you think you can eat this or not?"



At the public exhibitions, the centre of attraction of course was our USP & DCP students' project on converting motorbikes into e-bikes cheaply that got a big crowd; also from the School of Computing, there was this sketch-based programme where you could animate illustrations very rapidly in a life-like manner. It made amateur artist like me rather nervous.

The run up to the whole Exhibition actually involved many months of hard work. I, of course good at chairing meetings, chaired a number of these but I must say my only contribution to the work was to ask that the exhibition must have a strong "wow"

factor. So that was my only contribution. After that, all the work was done by Victor Shim and his creative committee and I must say this is one of the great advantages of being the President!

Despite the lack of Presidential direction, Victor Shim, and his team, as well as Deans KC Chua, Shen Zuowei, David Rosenblum and Yeoh Khay Guan, did a spectacular job – so please join me in thanking them for their great work!

Finally, a big part of my work of course revolves around our students which I enjoy a great deal.

It is always such a delight to see our students deeply involved in a myriad of initiatives, excelling often, failing sometimes, but always trying their best.

There are just so many inspiring stories which I'll just give a very brief sampling:

One of them is about Ang Jin Hui who entered NUS via the Normal (Technical) route, ITE and then polytechnic. But his strong drive to excel enabled him to win not one but four Lee Kuan Yew Scholarships, an NUS Scholarship, went to our USP, and spent a stint in Silicon Valley on our NUS Overseas College Programme. He graduated this year with a Bachelor of Computing (Honours).

Our students also did really well in many fiercely contested and prestigious international competitions from those involving Formula One racing cars (they did extremely well this year), to Law mooting (so the dressed up moot court is not the only one victory won, there are several other very prestigious ones), and industrial design competitions.

Of course when the SEA Games came around, about 60 of our students and alumni actually won more than 30 medals for Singapore. Last week, I was also very proud of the NUS Dragonboat teams. Although they didn't win, they showed absolute commitment in highly competitive races.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE



So I could go on, but my central point this evening is this.

NUS is not just a leading global university, we are not just a research powerhouse; we are not just a major engine of innovation and enterprise – we are also a dynamic community pursuing diverse and interesting things that enrich our campus and bring benefit to the wider society. Our work is marked by imagination, passion, a strong instinct for excellence and a commitment to making a difference.

To our Graduating class of 2015, I thank you for helping us to make our campus so vibrant; I congratulate you on your many achievements; and I wish you all the very best in all your future endeavours.

In closing, I hope you now have a clear idea of what the President actually does. And I guess your next question will be: “What actually does the Provost do?”

This is a complicated topic for a different time, but I can give you a hint. In April, I wanted to discuss a matter with the Provost and I found that he was in China. In fact, Eng Chye was trekking in the middle of the Gobi desert, supporting our Business School’s participation in the Gobi desert March. I’m not sure whether it’s part of his

contract, I have to check but you can tell that the Provost too has very few dull moments in his work!

So, with that I want you to also join me in greatly acknowledging the team from OCR, the Registrar's Office and the many other university groups that have spent the last several weeks preparing a wonderful commencement and tonight's terrific dinner.

And with that, thanking them.

Congratulations again to our graduating class and I do hope you have a most wonderful evening!

Thank You.