Commencement Dinner speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan

President, National University of Singapore

Ridge View Residential College

14 July 2017

NUS Pro-Chancellors
NUS Chairman
Distinguished Guests
Graduates, Alumni, Staff
Ladies and Gentlemen

How time flies!

It seems as if Commencement had only just started, but now, 10,857 graduand handshakes later, we are already marking its completion with this celebratory dinner.

I would to thank all of you for attending this dinner, but in particular, I would like to thank Professor Adekunle Adeyeye, Master of Ridge View Residential College (RVRC), who has kindly allowed us the use of his brand-new RVRC Hall for this evening’s dinner. We thought this would be a good occasion for our guests to view this new facility, and we promise Professor Kunle that we will not break anything or leave a mess.

I am sure each of our graduates will take away many different memories of NUS. In the spirit of immersing myself in Commencement, I reflected on my own fond memories of our University over the past year, and thought I would share four recollections tonight - about frying fish, flying selfies, making gold, and rhyming dons.
First, frying fish.

Last year, at 6 am on 3rd September, I found myself at the Willing Hearts Soup Kitchen together with about 40 students, staff and alumni volunteers. It was the first NUS Day of Service and our mission was to prepare a few thousand packs of cooked food to be sent to homes across Singapore.

I should explain that I am someone who does not normally cook anything that requires more than 3 steps, with the first step being to open the packet.

So it was quite an experience for me.

I surveyed the different tasks and decided to do the frying of the fish. It was a good choice because it turned out to be great fun although I used up way too much oil which splattered all over the place.

I also noticed that my fried fish seemed to break up into little bits a lot more than those that were fried by the students. But you know, our NUS students are not only hard
working and good at frying fish, they are also very big-hearted and politely avoided commenting on my obvious lack of frying skills.

While I am at it, I should also confess that I am pretty poor at taking selfies as well. But in September last year, I learnt I shouldn’t feel too bad about this because taking selfies and we-fies can now be automated.

I was visiting our School of Computing, and got to see many interesting student projects. In one of them, our students had developed software which allows you to pre-programme or control a drone to take pictures of specific aspects of an object, including, in this case, a we-fie.
It was really nice to witness first hand, the creativity and imagination of our students. I would also add that the spirit of enterprise is strong, as some of our students and their faculty advisers had gone on to form new start-ups to commercialise their work.

This brings me to my third recollection, which is of making gold.

One of the things I really enjoy is talking to our Professors about their research and visiting research labs. I visited several this year, including the Synthetic Biology lab directed by Prof Matthew Chang. Among the research being done there, Prof Yew Wen Shan had engineered a type of bacteria to produce chemicals, which, when applied to electronic waste, can recover gold from it.

I told Matthew that they should seriously accelerate this work – it could mean they would no longer need to apply for research grants, and that I could spend less of my time fund-raising.

I am sure that each of you will have many, somewhat similar memories or variations of these themes:

The sense of fulfilment that comes from working with your friends and peers on meaningful programmes that contribute to the community.
The pain and joys of project work – making things, breaking things, inventing new approaches, maybe joining a start-up.

The thrill of interacting with Professors working at the very frontiers of their fields.

Life is hard to predict, but I would not be surprised if, for many of you, the lessons learnt from these experiences would turn out to be very useful at some point in your careers.

But those of you who have been following my speech will realise that I have missed out my last recollection – the rhyming don.

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure of joining Tembusu College for its formal dinner. It was such a pleasure to see how well our Residential Colleges have grown as vibrant communities of learning. The dinner was very enjoyable but the real highlight for me was when the Master, Greg Clancey, delivered his whole College report entirely in rhyming verse.

Assoc Prof Gregory Clancey
It was really quite impressive.
That he could be so expressive,
Recounting the work of the College,
With great verve and knowledge.
I don’t think I could speak like this in rhyme.
Even if I tried hard for a long time.
It would be hard for me to set a precedent.
After all, I am just a humble President!

I wanted to end with this weak attempt at verse, to make the point that along the way, through the ups and downs of your future careers, through the twists and turns that life holds for all of us, don’t forget the light moments, the power of humour, and to live a full and multidimensional life.

I would like to close by thanking the Class of 2017.

During your time as students, you have added so much to the vibrancy and energy of our campus.

I welcome you warmly as our newest alumni and urge you to stay closely connected with our university. In your life-long journey of learning, we will be your lifelong partners in learning and discovery.

Once again, to the class of 2017, my very heartiest congratulations! Thank you.