

President's Speech at the Freshman Inauguration Ceremony 2013

Mr Soh Yi Da, Vice-President of the NUS Students' Union
FOCC Chairpersons,
Project Director, Freshmen Inauguration Ceremony
Student Leaders
Freshmen
Colleagues and friends

To our dear freshmen, you are the 105th class to be admitted to our university, and on behalf of the entire NUS community, I would like to say "Welcome to NUS!"

We are really delighted to welcome you as the newest members of the NUS family and look forward to working with each of you, to grow intellectually and as well-rounded individuals.

Today, I would like to use three quotations as the reference points for my remarks.

As you start your exploration of our campus, I thought it would be useful for me to share this first quotation:

"Beyond the small entrance, a visitor had the first impression that he saw a place of detention instead of a place of learning: all the doors and windows of the few buildings ...were fitted with iron bars, and iron spikes bristled on top of the surrounding walls. The place had been altered from an asylum to a school at the princely sum of \$1000!"

The quote is from Dr Chen Su Lan, one of the pioneer class who graduated in 1910, from the modest medical school he described, and from which NUS traces its roots.



DR CHEN SU LAN
PIONEER CLASS
OF 1910

The female lunatic asylum which was converted to house Singapore's first medical school in 1905.

Before you get too concerned, I should add that great progress has been made since those founding years.

For example, photocopying machines were introduced at our Bukit Timah Campus in the 1970s. This meant that students no longer had to hand-copy their friends' notes. And computers became pervasively present on this Campus in the early 1980s.



Hand Copying

Photocopying

Computers

Today, of course, you will have access to truly state-of-the-art facilities. If you walk around the newest addition to our campus, the NUS University Town, instead of walls with iron bars and spikes, you will see open, well-connected spaces that invite you to linger, mix and interact, and multi-use facilities that support learning, sports, arts and cultural programmes. I urge you to take full advantage of the wide range of NUS programmes and facilities, which are at the leading edge of global higher education.



But even as you do so, it is worthwhile to keep Dr Chen Su Lan's quote in mind.

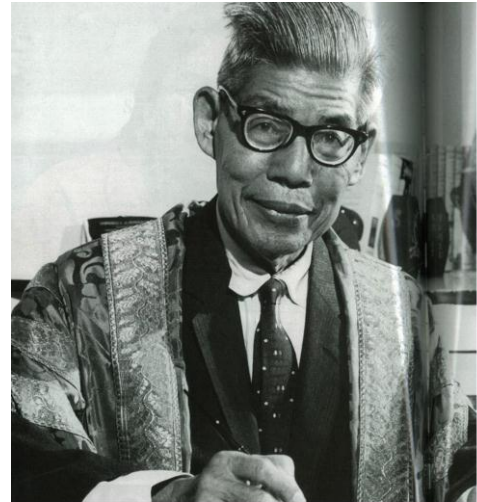
It reminds us of the long history and traditions that make up the rich tapestry of our university's past, of the aspirations and achievements of those who have come before us and upon whose work, we add our own distinctive contributions.

I believe this strong linkage with our past anchors us as members of a community confident in our history while seeking to innovate and excel in a highly complex and volatile present and future.

In keeping with this, I really hope you will take the time to understand the history and nature of the community of which you are now new but valued members.

The second quotation I would like to share is from Dr Lee Kong Chian, the first Chancellor of the University of Singapore.

At his installation in 1962, he said: “A university is not just an object of pride and prestige, nor only an instrument for acquiring knowledge and skills but also a home in which the human spirit can find freedom and true inspiration. Our responsibility is to guide the students along the ever higher levels of learning, to broaden and clarify their vision to grasp the ever grander vistas of knowledge, wisdom, truth and beauty”.



DR LEE KONG CHIAN
NUS' first Chancellor

His words ring true even today.

For most of you, it is likely that your immediate priorities are to develop the critical thinking skills, and the academic foundations and rigour which will enable you to succeed in your future work and life. You may also be uncertain about the intellectual demands in store for you and hence put your full focus on your studies.

This is natural. You should work hard, and we will certainly work hard with you to achieve your academic goals.

But for the vast majority, you can and should go beyond these, to “grasp the ever grander vistas of knowledge, wisdom, truth and beauty” that will keep you curious and ever willing to learn, whether it is within the classroom or outside of it, during your time in university or later, throughout your life.

I would take this further, to stress that you should also go beyond honing your intellect, to developing as a whole person. Attributes like resourcefulness, imagination,

interpersonal skills and cross-cultural effectiveness will be as vital to your future success as your intellectual ability.

You might ask me, how would I best develop such qualities while at university?

I think the key point is that you must have the courage, and the willingness to venture beyond your comfort zone.

Many of your seniors have come to realise how such active engagement and participation can transform their understanding of the world, the people around them, and themselves.

They have learnt that they can surpass their pre-conceived limitations and assumptions.

Take for example, the Tembusu College Gobi Desert Trekkers team. This is a team of 7 men and women committed to raise funds for the Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund by doing a 6-day, 250 km trek across the Gobi desert. Among them was Ms Tan Pei En, who harboured deep doubts about her ability to endure the trek, and who struggled through the training programme.



The trek pushed her mental and physical limits, and at the end, she recounted:



MS TAN PEI EN
Tembusu College
Gobi Desert Trekkers' Team

“I was continually ... disheartened. Trainings only ... reminded (me) of my inherent physical limitations: I was light, so the weight I carried on my shoulders was of greater burden to me. I was short, so most of the time I was .. struggling to keep up...

Now, having completed the race, and after all the pain and suffering I put myself through, I am 100% thankful for all the experiences I have had. Through this life-changing period, I have become a better version of myself. ”

I am not suggesting that all of you should go trekking in the Gobi Desert.

But, I do want to make the point that being willing to go beyond your comfort zone will open many new pathways for you, and in the process, will help you become “better versions” of yourself.

The NUS campus is richly diverse and we offer a myriad of unique and exciting opportunities for you to interact, share and learn together with your peers in ways that will help you discover yourself and develop as an individual.

Some of our students have found community engagement to be a very satisfying avenue for doing so. They have gained not only empathy, but a stronger understanding of how their actions can impact those who are less fortunate in society.

Eusoff Hall is one of our six Halls of Residence, and it recently celebrated its 55th anniversary. It has many unique traditions, but among the most commendable is the food delivery service to elderly folks living in the Chin Swee Road area. This has been on-going, every Saturday, since the late 1990s, some of whom in their 90s. Besides food delivery, our Eusoff Hall volunteers help with household chores, and provide a friendly face and a listening ear to these elderly residents. Every year, the Hall volunteers will also conduct health-check programmes and Grant-a-Wish projects.



Other student groups are involved in engaging communities overseas, where there is the added dimension of working in a different country and culture. For example, Kent Ridge Hall completed Project Love in 2012.

KR Volunteers helped set-up a vocational sewing house in a small town in north India. The goal was to help villagers, especially women, to learn new skills and earn extra income through sewing. It is envisioned that the centre will eventually be extended to include the teaching of other skills such as computing and carpentry.



I am also pleased that many of our community engagement efforts take place right here, on our campus. At the College of Alice and Peter Tan (CAPT) for example, students make it a point to share lunch or tea with our cleaners, dining staff and other “unsung heroes” to show their appreciation. Sharing a meal also allows our students to better understand the challenges faced by our cleaning and kitchen staff, even as they show professionalism, commitment and pride in their work.

As one student participant noted, “we can always strive to make their jobs and their time here more pleasant, simply by being responsible, and being a friend.”



This brings me to a crucial point.

NUS is an academic community. Intense questioning, vigorous discussion and robust debate is the norm here.

Yet, as a community of educated women and men, we should be able to put our ideas across without being offensive, and to be able to disagree with others without being disagreeable.

Whether in the real world or on social media, we should always strive to be responsible and kind.

As our newest students, you too should take personal responsibility for your own behaviour as a member of a highly respected university.

By so doing, you will add to the academic vibrancy on campus, while helping to make our community a kind and caring one, one which you will enjoy and always remember.



I would like to close with a final quotation from author Helen Keller who despite being deaf and blind from a young age, went on to do many remarkable things.

She said: “One cannot consent to creep when one has an impulse to soar”.

Your admission to NUS marks you out as bright, talented young women and men.

You have the ability not just to get by, but to follow your impulse to soar.

By boldly seizing the opportunities in NUS, and embracing the associated challenges, you will embark on a wonderful journey of learning and discovery that will enrich your lives, and help you grow as individuals, as leaders, and as members of our NUS community.

So, to our freshmen of 2013, I wish you an exciting time ahead, and once again, welcome to NUS!

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