

Freshmen Inauguration Ceremony
Monday, 4 August, 2014

Mr Soh Yi Da, President of the NUS Students' Union
Mr John Paul Chua, Project Director, Freshmen Inauguration Ceremony
Student Leaders
Freshmen
Colleagues and friends

To each and every one of our freshmen, welcome to NUS!

The entire NUS family joins me in extending our warmest welcome to you as the newest members of our community. As you can see, my colleagues have even come all dressed up to specially mark this occasion, and I look forward to introducing them to you shortly. We share your excitement at starting at NUS and look forward to working with you to make your NUS experience a rich, meaningful and enjoyable one. I am sure that you will add substantially to the academic and overall vibrancy of our campus and thank you in advance for this

My congratulations also on your entry into NUS. To have been admitted, you would have done well in your examinations; many of you extremely well. Excelling academically is very important. It is good that you have placed a strong emphasis on your studies, something which I am sure you will continue to do in University.

So it may seem somewhat odd to some of you that you would be the first group of freshmen to start on NUS' new grade-free first semester system, and this is something I would like to address today.

I should first explain briefly how the grade-free system works – in your first semester, there will still be tests and exams, and these will still be graded. But the key thing is that you can choose either to keep the grade or not. In other words, if you do well in the module, you can elect to have the grade go into the computation of your Cumulative Average Point (CAP). If you didn't do so well, you can decide not to have it counted in your CAP. Beyond your first semester, you will be able to exercise the same option for another three modules.

It is highly likely that, within a short time, you would have forgotten everything I have said today. However, I hope that you will remember at least one point, namely the reasons why NUS decided to introduce the grade-free system.

The short answer is that we really want our students to focus on optimising their learning as opposed to optimising their grades. It might be easier if I illustrate what I mean, with a couple of brief examples.

Some time ago, I spoke with some students who told me that they were very comfortable with literature and humanities subjects. When I suggested that they take some statistics or quantitative reasoning courses because these skills would be very useful in the future, their general reaction was: “No, no we can’t do that because we would not score a high grade and it would pull down our CAP”.

Similarly, when I ask students who have graduated from our University Scholars Programme, which were the toughest modules they had to do, the majority would say “the USP Writing & Critical Thinking” module, which will now be available to all NUS students. But when I ask them which modules have proved most useful to them in their work, the majority reply was also the same - “the USP Writing & Critical Thinking module”.

The point I am making is this: the courses which will challenge you the most, or in which you have a strong intrinsic interest, may very well prove to be most useful ones for you in the longer term.

There is a supplementary but very important point here. Having strong academic foundations, critical thinking skills and analytical abilities are important and necessary, but they are often not sufficient for success in work and life. In addition to strong academic abilities, you would also need personal qualities such as initiative, inner resilience and imagination, as well as the ability to work well with diverse types of people and groups of individuals. One successful corporate leader I know puts it this way: “*Know what* is good, *know how* is better, but *know who* is best”.

I very much hope that you will explore boldly outside areas that you are already good at, and consider taking courses which will really challenge you or in which you have a strong intrinsic interest. I also strongly encourage you to take full

advantage of the myriad of opportunities in NUS to learn and grow, outside of the classroom.




For example, NUS has amongst the best offerings in terms of study abroad options, double or joint degree programmes, and overseas internships. NUS students regularly participate and excel in international competitions in many fields, from designing robots to business-plan competitions, from sports to music and the arts. Beyond these, there are also many, very exciting opportunities locally, such as living in one of our Residential Colleges and Halls of Residence, local internships, or being engaged in giving back actively to the community.

The grade-free first semester system, we hope, will encourage you to explore outside of your comfort zone, and free you to focus on learning and uncovering your own interests and talents.

There can be few places better than the NUS campus for you to do this. The NUS community is large, diverse and vibrant and you will find individuals and groups engaged with an incredibly varied range of interests and pursuits.

One way to get a glimpse of this, is to check out the photo blog Bare NUSessities which was set up by Neo Kae Yuan, a second year student in the Faculty of Science.

Faces on the NUS Campus

		
<p>Q: "What's happiness to you?" A: "Being content with yourself, yet always striving to keep improving."</p>	<p>Q: "What's something you learnt today?" A: "Awesome things happen in the dining hall. It's the best place to meet people."</p>	<p>Q: "What's your superhero name?" A: "Hawkman"</p> <p>Q: "So, what would your superpower be?" A: "The obvious choice will be flight, which isn't that impressive. It has to be adaptation."</p>
<p>Vina, History (just graduated)</p>	<p>Stacy, Sociology (year two)</p>	<p>Ian Hawks, Earth & Environmental Science (exchange student)</p>

Credit: [Bare NUSessities](#)

Kae Yuan approached strangers around the NUS campus, to take their pictures and interview them. As you can see in these few profiles, the people you bump into in University Town, in the Central Forum, or in our cafes and canteens usually have an interesting life story or something unique to share.

I hope you will immerse yourself in our NUS community – enjoy it, benefit from it, and contribute to its vibrancy and growth. Each of you can also play a vital role in helping us create a community culture that is inclusive, compassionate and kind.

As a world-class academic institution, we bring together very talented and passionate people from very diverse backgrounds and with many different viewpoints. We encourage and expect intense discussion, questioning and vigorous debate. However, we should be able to put our ideas across without being offensive, and learn how to disagree with others without being disagreeable. Whether we engage others online or in person, we can all help to create an open and rigorous, yet civil, learning environment, and a community norm which is big-hearted, kind and respectful of others.

In this regard, I would like to acknowledge the student leaders from NUSSU, our various Faculty Clubs and Halls, as well as our Office of Student Affairs, who have worked tirelessly to welcome you to our campus and introduce you to our NUS community – a community to which we hope you will contribute actively.

My colleagues and I, your seniors and the NUS family look forward to working with you to make the most of your NUS experience. Do study hard. At the same time, make it an adventure to know yourself, to discover what you truly love, do many interesting things, make many enduring friendships, and develop into an interesting and truly multi-dimensional person.

On behalf of all of us at NUS, I wish you every success. Welcome once again!

Thank you.