

**Speech by NUS President Prof Tan Chorh Chuan  
Freshmen Inauguration Ceremony, 3 August 2015  
University Cultural Centre**

**The Question is, '*What is the Question?*'**

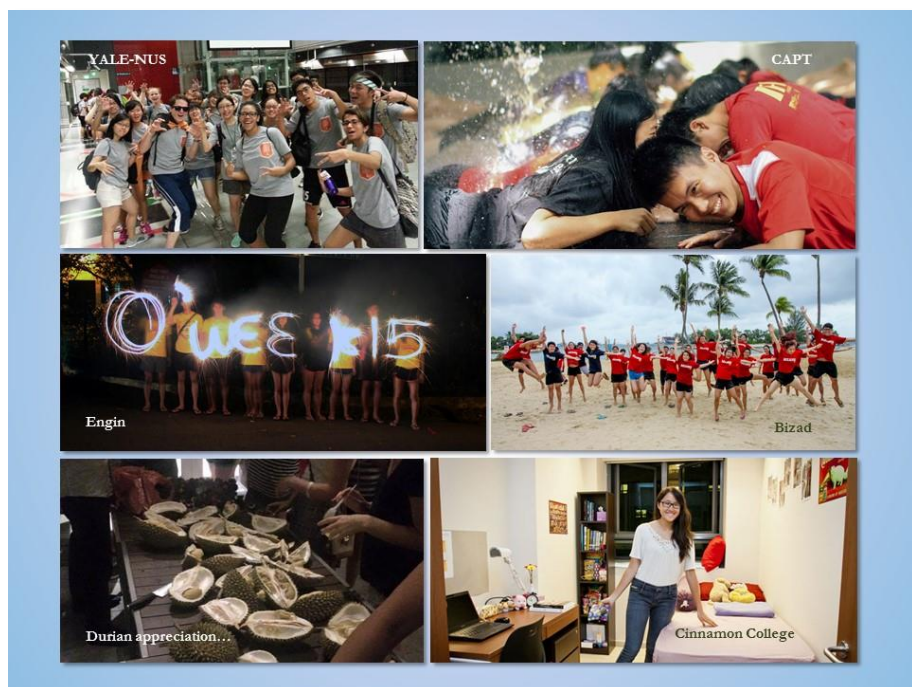
NUSSU President

NUS Student Leaders

Freshmen,

Colleagues and friends

To our freshmen, a very warm welcome to NUS! I hope you are enjoying the orientation period, making friends and getting used to life on campus. My colleagues and I look forward very much to working and interacting with you in the years ahead.



I know this is a period when you are being bombarded by huge amounts of information from many sources. After this FIC is over, it is likely you will remember the bhangra dancing much more vividly than the speeches. Hence, for today, I would like to plant just one thought with you, which I hope will stimulate further reflection.

One of the most important things I have found in my own work and life, is to try to ask the right questions. Asking the appropriate questions will help you to seek the right types of data, acquire the relevant expertise or skills, and to pursue the pathways which are more likely to lead to successful outcomes. This is particularly so today, when information is so freely available and there are many experts whom you could consult provided you know what you are looking for.

As you embark on this exciting and wonderful university journey, the question for you today is *what are the right questions?*

Let me explain what I mean. If I were like you just starting out in university on this slightly wet but happy August day, I think the key question I would ask is “how will I be different at the end of this journey?”

Physically, many of you would leave looking more awesome, or at least somewhat better, than when you first entered university, but that’s not what I am referring to.

Instead, I am thinking of a different type of next-order questions. Let me just mention two.

First, *can I get to know and understand myself much more deeply, and honestly?*

Not just the habits, strengths and preferences already evident, but also weaknesses, insecurities, and inner doubts.

Here, I want to stress a major point – quite often, we perceive weaknesses in ourselves because we have not really tested ourselves in these areas. Some students may lack self-confidence, especially when dealing with others, such as your seniors, who may be much more seasoned and knowledgeable.

For example, second year students Sylvester Chinn and Ng Li Ying are perhaps the youngest to have the huge tasks of organising this year's annual NUS Biathlon and the Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum. Yet they were not afraid to take these on and are doing a great job of it! When you choose to lead a demanding project, join an international competition, or run a challenging student initiative, you are likely to gain skills, experience and confidence which may convert perceived weaknesses into strengths.



Ng Li Ying, FASS Y2  
Project Director  
Kent Ridge Ministerial Forum

Sylvester Chinn, FoE Y2  
Project Director  
NUS Biathlon

For myself, I have enjoyed backpacking since my university days. Over the years, it has also helped me to discover the many layers of my own personality, and it has proven valuable in my life and career.

When I finished medical school, I spent three weeks backpacking alone in Greece. On my first day in Athens, I got mugged. I decided to move on to the nearby port of Piraeus where I found I could only afford to stay in a hostel for unemployed seamen. The place was packed and filled with cigarette smoke. The seamen themselves were tough-looking but friendly; however, they quickly lost interest in me because they found me rather unexciting. I didn't like the hostel very much, so the next day I took the first ferry out to a Greek Island I have not heard of before. When I got there, I found that it was a really quiet place, enlivened only by the inquisitive kids who had not seen a Chinese before.



Backpacking, which I still do regularly even now, is great fun, but it does also take you out of your comfort zone. In the process, you learn a great deal about yourself

and about coping with unpredictable situations. I believe strongly that the self-knowledge gained also makes you a stronger and more complete person.

I am not suggesting that all of you should take up solo backpacking. There are of course a multitude of other ways which can help you to understand yourself better. What they have in common is that they present unfamiliar situations or problems that challenge and stretch you intellectually and as a person.

As Goethe pointed out: “Talent is nurtured in solitude but character is formed in the stormy billows of the world”.

My second question, *how can I prepare myself so that I will be able to tackle problems in areas where I have very little domain knowledge?*

All of you, at some point in your life, will be confronted with problems or issues in which you have little domain understanding. I trained as a physician and scientist, but the things I have had to work on over the past 2 decades are often outside of medicine and science – such as financial issues and decisions; the design and construction of complex building projects; and so on.

Being able to think from first principles, identifying the right questions to focus on, and seeking and mastering essential new knowledge – these are qualities that would be fundamental regardless of what you decide to pursue in the future.

You may ask – *how would I go about acquiring these abilities?* This brings me to my main point today: asking the right questions will help each of us to seek ways to develop the skills that we need, and to look for opportunities and pathways that will help us move closer to the answers and solutions that matter the most.

I should also add that the questions that we ask need not revolve around ourselves. I think you should not be afraid to ask big questions that go beyond yourselves – questions that relate to major societal and global issues – and what you and your generation can do about them.

In closing, the true value of being in university goes beyond accumulating knowledge and scoring high marks. Your overall development as a person, your ability to ask the right questions, your willingness and capacity to contribute, and your aptitude to tackle challenges and problems effectively – these are as important, or even more important, than pure academic achievement.

Please do enjoy the rest of your orientation, and make the most of your time at NUS. The question I leave you with today is “what is your question”?

Thank you.

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