

**Speech by NUS President Prof Tan Chorh Chuan**  
**Freshmen Inauguration Ceremony 2016**

NUSSU President  
NUS Student Leaders  
Freshmen  
Colleagues and Friends

To all our Freshmen, welcome to NUS!

The entire NUS family joins me in extending our warmest welcome to you as our newest members. We are delighted you have chosen NUS for this important part of your journey of academic and personal growth. We look forward to working closely with you to make your NUS experience a fruitful, meaningful and memorable one.

To all our Freshmen, I first want to say that I am very sorry that your first days at NUS have been clouded by the controversies surrounding student-organised orientation activities. When my colleagues and I talk to our students, for the vast majority, orientation is an exciting, positive and memorable experience – learning about a new environment, making new friends, and having a foretaste of the myriad of academic and co-curricular options at NUS.

I also know that many of your seniors and our faculty and staff have put in a great deal of effort to make orientation a rich, fulfilling and warmly welcoming experience. The University does, however, expect orientation activities to be fully respectful of the dignity of all those participating, and, in recent years, we have put in place many measures to help ensure this. In particular, we make our stand very clear: we do not condone behaviour, games and activities that denigrate the dignity of individuals and that are sexualised. It is very disappointing that a few in our student community have clearly not internalised this.

We are fully committed to work together with the rest of the NUS community to address these issues comprehensively. But, there are a wide range things to consider, and we need the time and space necessary to do so over the next few weeks and months. In the meantime, we have called for a “time-out” by suspending student-organised orientation activities for the time being.

I want to reassure you that moving forward, it is not our intention to do away with orientation. We want to work with you to rethink how to do orientation in more meaningful ways so that all students, especially freshmen, will get to enjoy the orientation experience. For the current orientation, the Freshmen Inauguration Ceremonies; Welcome Receptions by Deans, Heads of Department and Masters; Faculty and Department briefings, and the NUSSU Rag and Flag activities will all continue as scheduled.

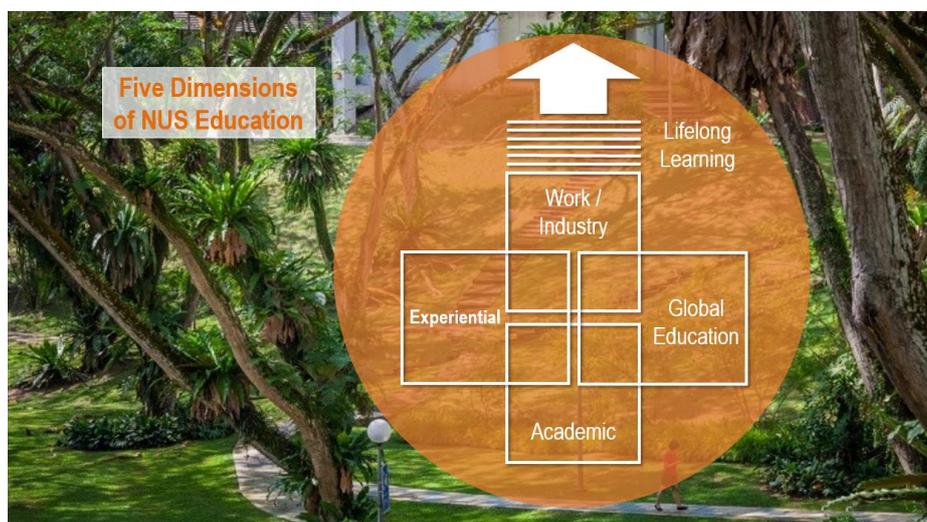
Tomorrow, as part of Flag, thousands of NUS freshmen and students would be working very hard to raise funds for needy and disadvantaged members of society. Our students have done so continuously for more than 50 years, and in 2015, raised more than \$450,000 which helped 19 charity programmes supported by the Community Chest. For this year, let's give Flag our all, to underscore powerfully the positive impact and dimensions of orientation, and our commitment to help contribute to society.

Myself, Provost Tan Eng Chye and other NUS colleagues will join you early tomorrow morning for part of Flag – We may not be able to raise much in terms of funds, but we definitely want to show our strong support for the work of our freshmen and students. In the same way, I very much hope and strongly urge our NUS community, seniors and Freshmen to come together, and focus on helping us to give all our Freshmen the warmest, most fruitful and enjoyable experience we can.

In this spirit, I would now like to move from this collective learning moment, to talk about Plato. Specifically, Plato's famous remark, "the unexamined life is not worth living." He explained this through a story about people sitting in a cave where they could only see shadows, which are copies of things in the real world. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, wisdom is depicted as getting out of darkness to see things as they really are. Having wisdom is therefore gaining understanding and experience and not taking information as what is given to you.

Indeed, the hallmark of an NUS education is its academic rigour – not taking information at face value, but to question, analyse and to think. To do this well, you also need academic breadth and the ability to work things out from first principles.

But, University education is not just solely about intellectual development. At NUS, we also stress the importance of other key dimensions of education: these are experiential learning; global education; real-world relevance; and lifelong learning.

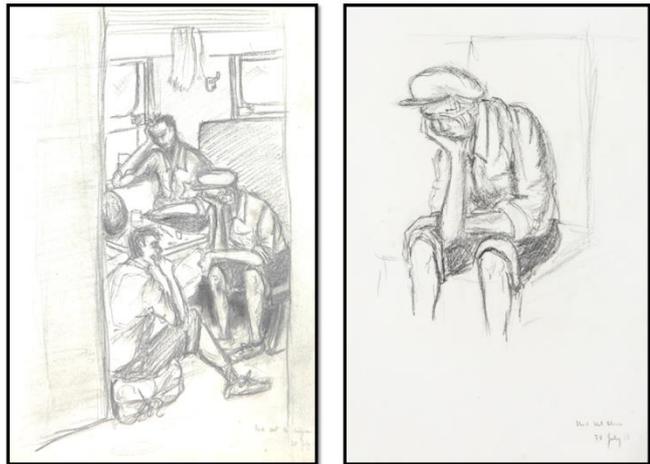


Let me make three points here, to underscore why these are so important.

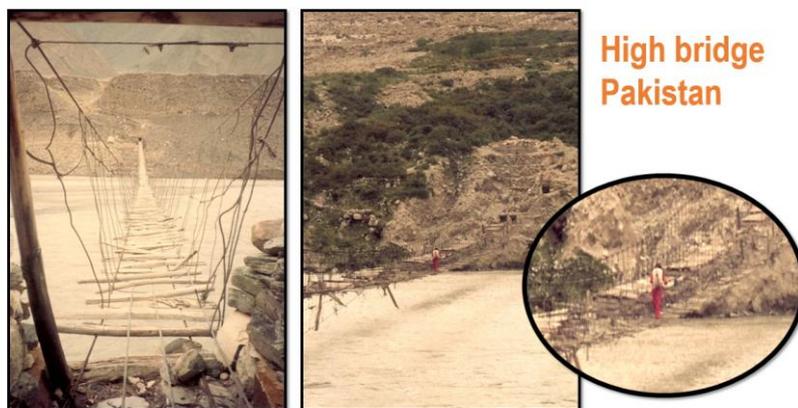
**First, having strong personal qualities and good interpersonal skills will be among the most valuable assets you can have, to thrive and contribute in a fast-changing world.**

Personal qualities such as initiative, leadership, integrity and resilience cannot be learnt from books. They can only be gained by exposing ourselves to difficult conditions and challenges, and overcoming obstacles. This will allow you to understand yourself more deeply, and to grow as a person.

As Goethe said: "...character is best formed in the stormy billows of the world". I believe this personally because I started back-packing when I was in University and continue doing so today. For me, one of the most important trips was when I back-packed alone in Western China for 6 weeks in 1988. I stayed in really basic places and took long train rides in the "hard seat" class. It is aptly named because the seats are indeed really hard, and the train is really packed. There were passengers lying under the seats, in the corridors and even on the luggage racks. Here are sketches I did of fellow passengers on one of these train journeys – I had a lot of time to do them because I had to sit on a nearby sink for the entire 10-hour ride.



Four years later, I was doing some walking in Pakistan when I came to this bridge – it had sticks about 2 feet apart tied to the frame. I was afraid and stepped on the first sticks gingerly. Then suddenly, a local girl came from behind and ran across the bridge. She ran across with a sack of potatoes on her back. I followed and found that it was actually not difficult to cross that bridge. I had overcome a limitation of my own mind.



For me, backpacking and trekking are tough but exhilarating experiences. They have helped me learn a great deal about myself and my ability to cope with difficult situations. I am not recommending that you should head out and take long hard train rides or trek in Pakistan. But you should consider taking on things that challenge you sufficiently to help you grow as a person.

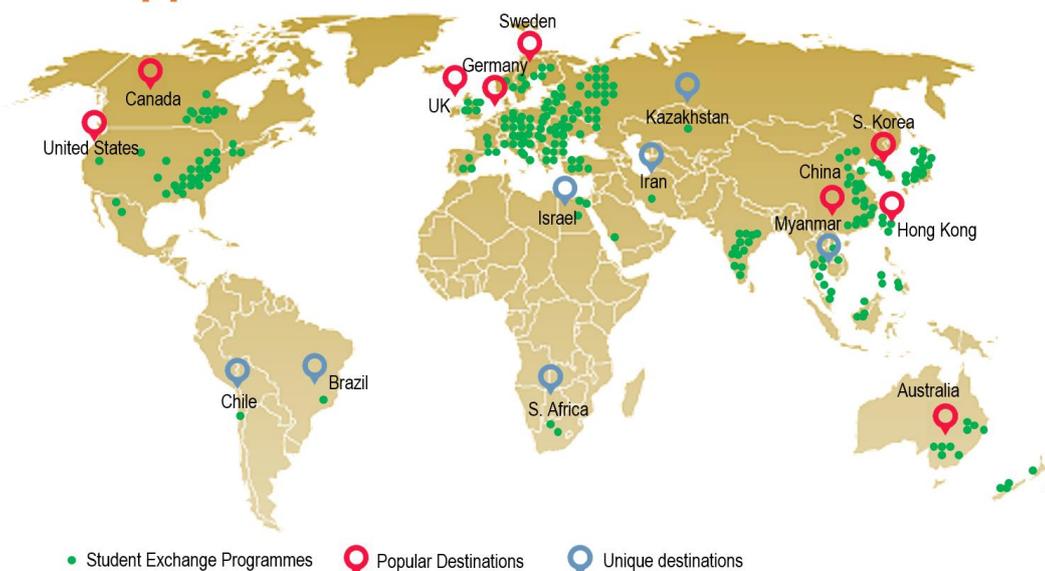
Alongside personal development, University is a great time to gain good interpersonal skills like communications, teamwork, and carrying others along with you. There is a very wide range of programmes in NUS that will help you to acquire these skills. So do consider staying in a Hall or Residential College, take up a sport or cultural activity, or be involved in projects in the community. You will find these very worthwhile in the long run.

**Second, being able to understand and work across cultures will strongly enhance your effectiveness as a global talent.**

NUS is a widely respected world leader in global education. Nearly eight in 10 of our undergraduates will have at least one overseas educational experience, and each year, nearly 2,000 students go away for a semester or more on exchange. NUS has more than 300 university partners around the world and this map shows some of the top destinations for global programmes. If you fancy something a bit off the beaten track, you might consider places such as Kazakhstan or South America.

Many of your seniors who have gone on exchange have reported that the experience has been transformative. Our International Relations Office is here to help by providing useful advice as well as financial aid for those who need assistance.

## Global opportunities



**Finally, arguably the most important thing of all is your interest and ability to continually learn, unlearn and re-learn.** The facts that you learn, even in NUS, will soon become obsolete. To keep relevant, one of the most valuable things that you can develop during your time with us is the zest for new knowledge and the capacity and willingness to continually learn.

### Closing

The five dimensions of NUS education that you will enjoy and benefit from are – academic, experiential, global, real-world relevance, and lifelong learning, are inter-related and synergistic. Your active and purposeful participation in these will be of great use to you later. At the same time, they will also make your experiences at NUS richer, more memorable and enduring.

I started with Plato's famous quote  
"the unexamined life is not worth living."

But also do remember this rejoinder:  
"the unlived life is not worth examining".

So, remember to live life to the fullest during your NUS journey. Welcome once again to NUS, and I wish you every success.

Thank you.

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