

INAUGURAL ADDRESS BY THE VICE-CHANCELLOR OF
THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE,
PROFESSOR SHIH CHOON FONG,
ON 1 JUNE 2000

Members of the National University of Singapore community.

Standing before you this June morning, I feel deeply honored for the trust given to me to lead this remarkable university into the future.

Where We Are Today

This university has made significant progress since it started as a medical school in 1905. Over the past two decades, we have greatly benefited from the distinguished leadership of my predecessor, Professor Lim Pin. NUS began as an undergraduate institution that emphasized teaching excellence. With Professor Lim Pin as our Vice-Chancellor, NUS has transformed itself into a premier institution embracing research as an integral part of its mission.

Our departments and faculties have achieved high levels of competence in their fields. We instill in our students diligence and discipline, and we can take great pride that our graduates are pragmatic and proficient in their areas of specialization. Today, NUS degrees in the humanities, the social and natural sciences, and the professional disciplines are recognized in this region and the rest of the world as proof of strong academic achievement.

With the foundation firmly laid by Professor Lim Pin, I now stand in an excellent position to build upon it and move this university forward in this age of fast-changing technology and globalization. Great challenges lie ahead of us, and we will engage these challenges together.

NUS and the New Economy

Singapore has progressed rapidly and has reached a high level of development. Today, our nation stands at the edge of a new frontier: the frontier of a new economy, the frontier of opportunities and dangers, the frontier of progress or even of decline.

In the new economy, wealth is not only generated by mass production and assembly lines. Wealth is also generated from ideas, patents, software and control and ownership of knowledge. Knowledge is in turn, created by talent.

We have always been told that we are a city-state with limited natural resources. But this is not a handicap in the new economy. Opportunities and wealth now arise from knowledge, talent and entrepreneurial spirit – and I am confident that all these are found in you, the NUS community of students, staff and faculty.

Educating able graduates to meet the complex needs of our economy has always been our primary role as Singapore's comprehensive university. But now, an additional and equally important role is the discovery, creation, and application of new knowledge in the service of our nation and beyond.

Today, I ask our NUS community to dedicate ourselves to this vision. NUS will be to Singapore what Stanford is to Silicon Valley. We will aim to be the intellectual, entrepreneurial pulse of Singapore, the confluence of local and foreign talent. Yes, NUS will be a knowledge enterprise that transcends boundaries.

NUS as a Global Knowledge Enterprise

So what is knowledge? We are told that knowledge is information, software, patents, trade and industry secrets. But knowledge is more than that. Knowledge is ideas, insights, intuition, and imagination. Knowledge is both tacit and explicit. Knowledge is both EQ and IQ. Knowledge enables a holistic approach, deals with contradictions and supports both construction and deconstruction. Indeed, the most valuable knowledge resides, ferments and grows in the mind.

Above all these, knowledge is versatile and inexhaustible. Unlike resources such as oil and minerals that are depleted through consumption, knowledge flourishes when used. And knowledge can be the "yeast" to generate still more knowledge. At the height of the British Empire, Winston Churchill made this prophecy: "Empires of the futures are empires of the mind."

Our challenge is to provide the environment and the means for knowledge to grow and ferment. We must rise to this challenge because this knowledge enterprise, like so many other enterprises, is rapidly becoming globalized. NUS will be competing with the best universities in North America, Europe, Australia and Asia. For example, INSEAD, Chicago's Graduate School of Business, and

others have already established a presence in Singapore and more will be coming. Even elite institutions such as Columbia, Duke, and Stanford have begun to deliver customized quality education through the Internet.

A worldwide perspective is needed to effectively deal with knowledge generation, dissemination and application. Today, being the best in the region is not good enough. We must compete in the international arena. Our academic programmes and research initiatives must be evaluated by international benchmarking. Only then will our aspiration to become a knowledge enterprise be fully realized.

How We Can Respond to Challenges in the Global Knowledge Marketplace

The heart of a great university is talent – the knowledge, the imagination and the passion to discover, to invent, to innovate, to educate, and to create opportunities and wealth.

- **Changing Mindsets**

Professor Lester Thurow, an eminent economist, spoke of shutting up the old and opening up the new. Specifically, he spoke of the creative destruction of outdated mindsets in order to build the new.

For NUS to succeed as a knowledge enterprise, we need to shut out the bureaucratic mindset and make room for the entrepreneurial spirit. We must be resourceful, innovative and pioneering. We should be receptive to new ideas. We should not hide behind rules and regulations; we should not resist change that expands opportunities. We should have the confidence to take and manage risk, and to learn from our failures as well as our successes.

We should have the confidence and enthusiasm to engage our students, to unleash their creative energies and to catalyze the blossoming of their minds. We should challenge each individual to think outside the box and apply knowledge to unfamiliar situations and settings.

Let me share this story about a pioneer, a leader of an express delivery service around the globe. While studying for a management degree at an Ivy-League University, Fred Smith submitted a paper with a bold new idea – reliable overnight delivery service for the whole of continental USA. His management professor responded: “Mr Smith, your concept is interesting and well-formed, but

in order to earn better than a “C”, the idea must be feasible.” Fred Smith went on to found Federal Express. The rest is history.

- University as the Start of Life-Long Learning

The true measure of our success is not how well our students score in examinations, but how well prepared they are for life.

Many of you will agree that nature has given every child the gift of curiosity and discovery. Have you noticed how a child discovers his world? First noticing what is around him, then getting curious about how things work. How things interrelate. It is as simple as being intrigued when the child sees a caterpillar on a leaf. The child wants to know where it goes at night; who its friends are; what it eats; how it grows and what it becomes. The heart of the matter lies in nurturing that child-like curiosity and creativity that reside in every individual.

We can start by making the NUS educational experience an enriching one that cultivates the multiple talents of our students. This experience must ignite the “spark” that leads to ideas, stimulate the ability to “see connections”, and nourish the spirit with the drive to create. In short, the university experience should be a rich and multi-faceted beginning to life-long learning.

- Borderless Departments and Faculties: Building a Knowledge Community

Today, we have nine faculties with more than fifty departments, each with its own distinctive strengths and areas of excellence. While we build on our existing strengths, we must guard against compartmentalization and stratification.

We can learn valuable lessons from the best universities. They are rapidly breaking down established structural and disciplinary boundaries. This has allowed for exchange of ideas and flow of people across departments and faculties. Opening of borders has led to lively, exciting scholarly exchanges that advance intellectual, scientific and technological frontiers. This process has also spawned new knowledge areas, and inspired curriculum innovation.

To create a climate conducive for cultivating the multiple talents of our students and faculty, I will mention examples of key inter-faculty initiatives. Life science poses the greatest intellectual and scientific challenge of the 21st century. A strategic alliance combining the expertise of Medicine, Dentistry, Science, Engineering and Computing faculties can work towards building a critical knowledge base in Singapore. Our nation will need this knowledge base to

develop the pharmaceutical and biotech industries, and even life science enterprises yet to be created.

Our university is also in a unique position to offer both critical analysis and indigenous insight into Asian economy, polity and society. We will draw on the combined strengths of the Arts and Social Sciences, Business Administration, Design and Environment, and Law. In this way, we will be well-placed to develop a more finely nuanced and a more sensitively critical appreciation of Asian societies. These studies aim to offer insights into the workings of our neighbors and an understanding of our own heritage.

But can faculty members alone take NUS to the new heights we have set for ourselves? The answer is no! Our non-academic staff are also vital team members on this journey. Transforming NUS into a knowledge enterprise, equal to the best around the globe, has to be the common goal of all, staff and faculty members. Ours is an interdependent knowledge community. And there can be no divide between us. By working closely together, our community can scale even greater heights. With our successes will come more resources and opportunities to recognize, and to reward our dedicated staff and faculty members.

- *Borderless University: Building a Global Knowledge Community*

The knowledge marketplace transcends physical and cultural boundaries. To take on our role as a knowledge enterprise, we must establish alliances and at the same time, spar with the best. This is where we can learn from the global culture of Singapore Airlines. The key to its success lies in forming strategic partnerships with other airlines and building a global customer base.

Over the past year, we have come closer to becoming a borderless university. We have extended beyond our traditional borders when we formed the strategic alliance between MIT and NUS (the Singapore-MIT Alliance). Here we have a microcosm of a global knowledge community – where scientists, engineers and computing specialists carry out joint teaching and research. This is an exciting, collaborative learning enterprise at all levels: students, faculty and institution.

And we should also leverage on the scientific and technological expertise found within our national research institutes and research centers sitting right on our campus. They are actively engaged in transforming new knowledge, discoveries and inventions into commercial applications. With these research organizations on board, we are well positioned to develop stronger partnerships with local and

global corporations. These diverse collaborations will allow both students and faculty members to experience the complexities of the world beyond the university, a world they will help to change.

The healthy mix of research and curricular ventures, alliances with universities, and collaborations with local and global organizations will create a vibrant intellectual and entrepreneurial climate. This climate nourishes our community of students, staff and faculty. And they, in turn, will enrich our society and create wealth in our country.

Seizing Opportunities

Some of you may recall the heydays of the passenger steamship. The people who owned and operated large ocean-going passenger transport companies thought their businesses were sound and enduring as long as their ships remained seaworthy. The men who steered the ships, stoked the boilers and served the passengers, looked up at the skies and scoffed at the flimsy, primitive planes flying overhead. Even Lord Kelvin, the famous scientist and President of the Royal Society, said in 1895: “Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible.”

We now know how shortsighted they all were! Few in the sea-going people-moving industry could imagine that airplanes would lead to the demise of the passenger shipping industry. Why was that so? Were they poor service providers? Did they not work hard enough? Of course not. Rather they could not see that they were in the midst of accelerating technological change. While it took several thousand years to move from oar to sail to steam in water travel, it took only a few decades to move travel from sea to air. At the dawn of the 21st century, we face the same challenges.

NUS as a Distinctive Institution

The renowned educationist, Clark Kerr, once wrote that for all great universities, “the borders of the campus become the boundaries of the state.” This statement encapsulates our mandate as we forge ahead.

As we push forth to scale greater heights, what sets us apart from other great universities is our distinctively Singaporean character – a character borne of active engagement with the global knowledge marketplace, yet rooted in a sensitive and critical appreciation of our shared values and heritage. This tension between the local and the global is a creative one.

Our students enter this university with dreams – dreams of becoming professionals, entrepreneurs, scholars, and leaders of society. We can help them fulfill their dreams. We will nurture students who are citizens of the world, versatile and alert to global as well as local opportunities. At the same time, they will also possess a deep understanding of self, culture and society, and a sense of personal responsibility and moral obligation to contribute to society.

But to do all this, we have first to acknowledge who we are. We know that a great university is a community of talented people – students, alumni, staff and faculty members like you – with imagination, ambition and aspiration. Each of you is an important piece in the intellectual mosaic – bright, inventive, enterprising, passionate, dedicated and enduring. And when all the pieces come together, we see the larger picture and purpose. The responsibility for moving this great university forward rests on your shoulders, as much as it does on mine. It is critical that each of us play our part. Our collective efforts will energize us and help us grow into a distinctively Singaporean institution.

As we prepare ourselves for the challenges ahead, let us all take great pride in our university. NUS today is stronger than it has ever been. Anchored by talented faculty and resourceful staff, supported by esteemed alumni and friends, invigorated by bright and promising students, NUS will get even stronger. Let us now embark on this journey towards our vision.

Thank you.