

**SPEECH BY PROFESSOR TAN ENG CHYE,  
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE  
AT THE SPECIAL CONFERENCE CEREMONY  
FOR THE HONORARY DOCTOR OF LAWS  
AND THE DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI SERVICE AWARD  
HELD ON TUESDAY, 13 NOVEMBER 2018, 11.00 AM AT NUS**

Madam Halimah Yacob, President of the Republic of Singapore and NUS Chancellor

Honorary Graduand Yang Amat Berhormat Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad

Distinguished Alumna Yang Amat Berbahagia Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Haji Mohd Ali

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and Mrs Goh

Ministers

NUS Chairman

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning. Thank you, Madam President, for presiding over this special ceremony as our Chancellor. We bid a warm welcome to our Honorary Graduand and alumnus Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia, and our distinguished alumna, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Haji Mohd Ali, and to all our friends here from Malaysia and Singapore.

Just two months ago, Madam President and I attended our first University of Malaya-NUS Inter-University Tunku Chancellor Golf Tournament. This annual gathering has been going strong for 50 years, and is an enduring symbol of UM's and NUS' mutual respect and friendship, and our shared heritage. The two universities are also partners in the Association of Pacific Rim Universities and the ASEAN University Network. A shining example of our combined impact is the recent life-changing discovery that tailored chemotherapy for children with high risk leukaemia increases cure rates, and reduces relapse rates. The two-country study, which involved the medical schools of UM and NUS, was the first in the world to prove this.

My hope is that the two universities will continue to work together to create sustained impact. NUS looks to collaborate with UM and other Malaysian universities to build a strong network of research, innovation and enterprise in Southeast Asia. This network would facilitate the flow of talent and ideas, to create and grow many shared opportunities for the region and our communities.

Both NUS and UM trace our founding to the King Edward VII College of Medicine. While the Medical School is today the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, we know that the College holds a special place in the hearts of Tun Dr Mahathir, his beloved wife, Tun Dr Siti, and the Medicine Class of 1947 classmates, who are here with us in the audience today.

It all began, classmates say, when Tun Dr Mahathir became a frequent visitor to Holne Chase, the hostel for female students where Tun Dr Siti was staying. Since then, the couple have lived a lifetime of adventure that has included Tun Dr Mahathir's dramatic rise in politics to become the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981, and an even more stunning comeback as Malaysia's seventh Prime Minister in 2018. They have built an amazing life

together, with seven children, 18 grandchildren and a great granddaughter. We are honoured to have both of them here with us today, for the conferment of the Honorary Doctorate of Laws on Tun Dr Mahathir, and the Distinguished Alumni Service Award on Tun Dr Siti.

As a mathematician, my wife would have me state that it is a mathematical truth that behind every great man is a great or even greater woman. Tun Dr Mahathir, I hope you do not mind, sir, that NUS first recognises your outstanding partner, Tun Dr Siti.

Tun Dr Siti is a role model for women. After the Second World War, Tun Dr Siti enrolled in the King Edward VII College of Medicine in Singapore; she was the only Malay female student in her cohort. She graduated in 1955 — with some coaching in Physics and Chemistry from a classmate named Mahathir — and returned to Kuala Lumpur to serve her housemanship at the General Hospital.

As a young doctor, Tun Dr Siti was passionate about improving the health and wellbeing of Malaysians, particularly those living in rural areas. She was a trailblazer in so many ways, achieving many ‘firsts’ at the Ministry of Health. In 1965, she became the first woman in Malaysia to be appointed Medical Officer in the Maternal and Child Health Department. In 1974, she was the first female doctor to be appointed the State Maternal and Child Health Officer.

Beyond her impact on public health, Tun Dr Siti has served in numerous leadership positions, championing adult literacy, mental health and drug abuse control. She was President of the Malaysian Girl Guides Association, President of the Malaysian Medical Association Foundation and President of the Association for the Rehabilitation of Handicapped Children. In recognition of her assiduous efforts and contributions, Tun Dr Siti has received numerous local and international honorary doctorates, awards and titles.

Tun Dr Siti is a pioneer and an inspiring role model for women in Malaysia and around the world. The National University of Singapore is immensely proud of her achievements and impact.

May I now invite the Chairman of the NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Hsieh Fu Hua, to present the Distinguished Alumni Service Award to Yang Amat Berbahagia Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Haji Mohd Ali, please.

Thank you, Tun Dr Siti and Chairman. Please allow me now to say a few words about our Honorary Graduand, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Tun Dr Mahathir has led a fulfilling, eventful and illustrious life. He is Malaysia’s longest serving prime minister and he has created and shaped history in Malaysia and the region in many ways. My colleague will very shortly tell you more about his outstanding achievements in the citation to be read.

What I would like to talk about today is Tun Dr Mahathir’s spirit of lifelong learning and service. His curiosity is legendary. Malaysia’s Home Affairs Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin once said that although Tun Dr Mahathir trained as a medical doctor, “he is always brimming with ideas in various fields including economics, politics, law, culture and technology”.<sup>i</sup> Tun Dr Siti has also shared that her husband has a voracious appetite for reading a range of topics that include airplanes, cars, boats, science, politics, the economy, interior decoration and handicraft.<sup>ii</sup> He is known to read three books at any one time, and was even once named a National Reading Icon in Malaysia. Tun is curious about everything!

This burning curiosity, this spirit of lifelong learning, is what keeps us young, and is also what defines NUS. It has energised this University since our founding in 1905, and we hope very much to imbue this spirit in all our students. NUS has, over the years, developed a rich, comprehensive and holistic education framework, where our students learn and develop through global and Asian exposure, industry attachments, residential living and learning, and entrepreneurship experiences. They learn also through programmes in writing and communications, quantitative reasoning and computational thinking.

But the world is changing rapidly. In this Fourth Industrial Revolution, many sweeping and disruptive changes are impacting economies and industries, affecting jobs and the nature of work. No university will be able to provide students with all the skills that are going to be needed 20 years down the road. This is why, we at NUS must prepare our community for a world of change, to equip them with the capacity for lifelong learning. NUS is already widely respected for our education, research and entrepreneurship; we aim also to become a leading provider of quality continuing education for professionals in Singapore and the region.

To do this, we will look to Tun Dr Mahathir's zeal for learning, and his zest for life for inspiration. At 93, he is still always on the go, reading, learning, and sharing his insights on a wide range of issues. Tun Dr Mahathir has already achieved much in his career and life, and yet still continues to serve Malaysia with distinction and verve, exemplifying service to society and country.

NUS is today privileged to recognise Yang Amat Berhormat Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's outstanding achievements with the Honorary Doctor of Laws. Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2012/05/20/dr-mahathir-named-nations-reading-icon/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/siti-hasmah-wife-mahathir-malaysia-pm-interview-10576948>