

University Awards 2015
Speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President, NUS

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University Cultural Centre

Senior Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Education & Ministry of Manpower, Mr Hawazi Daipi

NUS Pro-Chancellor Mr Po'ad Mattar

NUS Chairman and Trustees

Award Recipients

Distinguished guests

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

What defines NUS as an institution and a community?

If we look back over the 110 years of our history, a few themes emerge.

Our university had a rather shaky beginning.

The modest medical school from which we trace our roots started classes in July 1905, before the legislation to set it up became law. ¹

At that time, Dr GD Freer, the first Principal, noted:

“The buildings in the whole female lunatic asylum were altered and equipped for the purposes of a medical school and have so far, proved sufficient....

At the present time, students have to walk nearly 2 miles to their Chemistry classes.”

This was 1905, which is why the Principal could talk about students having to walk 2 miles to class without a sense of crisis.

The School's official opening had also to be delayed until most of the equipment had arrived from Britain.

Yet, despite these challenges, the School graduated its first 7 students in 1910, who went on to make very substantial contributions.²

By 1916, its degree was recognized by the UK, and its growing international standing led to its renaming as the King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1921, just 16 years after the launch of the School.

One could therefore say that the instincts of achieving at a high international level, and of excelling despite the odds, run very deeply in our institutional DNA.

One hundred and ten years on, this commitment to true excellence shines with undiminished energy. And at NUS, it is finding expression with even greater impact across a wide range of areas.

Yet, even within this general, high level of achievement and contribution, there are individuals who still stand out. Tonight, we recognize eight such individuals not just for their accomplishments, impressive as they are, but also for the qualities and values they exemplify, and for their broader uplifting impact on our university and wider community.

Outstanding Educator Award

Rigorous, high quality education has been a cornerstone of our university's work throughout its history.

But as our former President, Mr SR Nathan, noted of his studies here from 1952 to 1954:

“University teaching methods were very unfamiliar at first. Hitherto I had grasped the content of a lesson and just regurgitated the facts. Now, I needed to form a deeper understanding of the subject, often having to get to grips with a variety of interpretations.”

“University taught me how to study. Learning became a habit, a continuing quest for knowledge....”³

The best educators are deeply aware that their role is a transformative one. Through academic engagement with students, teachers become catalysts, setting the stage for young minds to discover the power of imagination and the spirit of inquiry.

The two Outstanding Educators we honour tonight, share a philosophy focused on transforming students into active self-learners, well equipped to explore, analyse and formulate responses to a diverse range of situations.

Both educators – Brian Farrell from European and military history, and Ben Leong from Computer Science – are known for courses that are meticulous and rigorous, but also incorporate inventive components such as role-playing scenarios, immersive field trips, and even online gaming. This rich, immersive learning stimulates their students to activate their capacity for insightful and original ideas.

Associate Professor Leong, dressed here as Obi Wan Kenobi, puts it this way, “my goal is to kindle the intrinsic motivation in my students to work towards becoming the best version of themselves”. In other words, “may the Force be with them”.

Young Researcher and Outstanding Researcher

The force also burns brightly in our Research award recipients who carry on and vastly extend, our long tradition of ground-breaking research and its application.

When one of NUS’ predecessor institutions, Raffles College, opened in 1928, it was after a considerable delay because of the rubber slump in 1921. In his foundation speech, the Principal Richard Winstedt said:

“We here are occupied with ephemeral interests, tin and rubber and shipping and the making of money. Fifty years ago, rubber was hardly used, a few thousand years ago tin was hardly used, and a few thousand years hence, people may smile over the products of this country today as we smile at stone age implements. But people will not smile over the results of scientific inquiry and research because their benefits are lasting. Raffles College, therefore, should stand like a lighthouse in the misty and sometimes turbulent sea of ephemeral interests.....”

The work of our Young Researcher Award winners, Dr Goki Eda and Dr Zhang Rui, certainly stand like lighthouses in the misty sea, pointing the way to useful potential new applications.

Dr Zhang is an expert in the transmission and optimisation of wireless communications, and he seeks to actualise the laws of physics and mathematics in elegant engineering solutions. His vision is to help develop next-generation wireless networks that can support both data and energy transmissions.

Dr Eda is pioneering exciting new advancements in thin-film electronics, based on the novel application of nanomaterials. His work is setting the framework for the next generation of electronics, which will strongly feature nanoscale device applications.

Doing work of lasting impact are our Outstanding Researcher Award recipients, who are truly accomplished individuals of global standing. They embody what it means to spend a lifetime passionately pursuing new frontiers of knowledge and understanding.

Professor Gan Wee Teck's distinguished career in mathematics has been an intellectual journey of the highest order, one where he has probed, studied, and helped solve wildly complex mathematical conundrums. By doing so, he has opened exciting new pathways for future generations of mathematicians and scientists. Professor Gan in his great modesty, still maintains that "mathematics is easier than most real-life problems". I don't think most of us agree with this!

Professor Neal Chung is a globally renowned trailblazer in the field of membrane science, doing work with tremendous implications for a sustainable future of clean water and clean energy. His research has resulted in 30 patents and his many contributions include the design of the world's most advanced osmosis system. Despite these remarkable accomplishments, he continues to work tirelessly on new research breakthroughs and how they can be applied for the advancement of society.

Outstanding Service Award

The commitment to service to country and society, is one of most consistent themes in our university's history. It is a key point in nearly all the milestone speeches by the university's leadership since our founding in 1905.

For example, in 1965, President Yusof Ishak noted in his installation speech as the Chancellor of the University of Singapore that: "Our University must be constantly alive to the needs of our society if it is to fulfil its role. The future is too challenging for all of us for us to do other than our best. And if we do our best, the University of Singapore will be as illustrious as the name of this new nation already is in several fields of administration and enterprise."

This evening, we are proud to recognise two exceptional individuals, who have brought this tradition of service to fresh heights.

Dr Seek Ngee Huat is Chairman of publicly-listed Global Logistic Properties Limited and a global leader in real estate investment. Among his many distinguished achievements, he served as President of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation's (GIC) Real Estate Pte Ltd arm for 15 years. During that time, he helped established real estate investment as a compelling business model and asset class for sovereign wealth funds.

Dr Seek has also played a leading role in raising the scale and depth of real estate research in the Asia-Pacific region. His wide networks, numerous global advisory positions, and his expertise and standing as a thought leader, has helped enlarge Singapore and NUS' sphere of influence, and created new opportunities in both research and commerce. His dedicated leadership as the founding Chairman of NUS' Institute of Real Estate Studies, has been pivotal in its transformation into a leading knowledge centre on Asian real estate.

Our second Outstanding Service Award recipient is equally distinguished. Mr Gopinath Pillai is a man of remarkable talents, and his career and contributions span across government, business, academia and philanthropy.

He has been an exceptional diplomat for Singapore, and played an instrumental role in building and deepening ties between Singapore and India; he continues to serve as Ambassador-at-Large and Special Envoy to Andhra Pradesh. With his deep understanding and unique insights into Singapore-India relations, his skilful leadership as the inaugural Chairman of the Institute of South Asian Studies, he has enabled the institute to play a strategic and respected role in facilitating greater understanding and interactions with South Asia.

A business leader, Mr Pillai is presently Chairman of two public-listed companies in India. Long before the term social enterprises gained wide currency, Mr Pillai was an adept practitioner, successfully serving as NTUC Fairprice's first Chairman (1983 to 1993), and guiding the Co-operative in balancing between profitability and social responsibility. Social endeavours remain close to his heart, and he is presently Vice-Chairman of the Ang Mo Kio – Thye Hua Kwan Hospital, as well as Advisor to various societies.

Our Outstanding Service Award recipients share one other common attribute: they are both proud alumni of NUS, and each had previously received the Distinguished Alumni Service Award. Dr Seek and Mr Pillai seized the opportunities that came their way, but retained the strong desire to give back to their communities, and their alma mater. They worked tirelessly, over decades, to expand the space and opportunities for future generations. In their commitment to excellence and service to community, they are true exemplars of the NUS tradition and spirit.

Conclusion

2015 is a fitting year for Singaporeans to celebrate our accomplishments as a nation, and for our community to reflect on our progress as a university.

No one can foretell how the world will change in the next 50 years, less so in the next 110 years. Yet, the lessons from our past should inspire us with renewed energy and optimism to stride confidently into the future, with the knowledge that we can make a difference. To strive and excel, we must take up the mantle, and demonstrate the same passion, commitment, imagination and tenacity our forebears have shown, and which our Award winners tonight exemplify.

NUS will then be well-poised to continue our upsweep as a leading global university centred in Asia, contributing to the nation and beyond.

Once again, my very heartiest congratulations and thanks to all our award winners this evening.

Thank you.

References

¹ Lee YK. Ann Acad Med Singapore 2005;34:4C-13C.

² JS Cheah. Ann Acad Med Singapore 2005;34:19C-24C

³ SR Nathan. An unexpected journey – Path to the Presidency