



A Message

FROM THE PRESIDENT

23 December 2020

Dear alumnus,

NUS in 2020

2020 has been a most unusually eventful year. It began on a high note, with the launch of [NUS115](#) on 11 January 2020. Themed “Shaping the Future”, NUS115 was planned as a year-long celebration to commemorate the University’s transformative impact over 115 years, and our continual effort in shaping the future for a better world. Then, COVID-19 struck and that changed everything. There was transformation – in culture, will and resilience. We surged ahead with confidence, hitting new milestones at an unprecedented rate.

With COVID-19, our instinct was to care for our students in a practical, forthright way. More than 1,300 NUS students were overseas on various academic and exchange programmes. We spared no effort in getting them home to safety. We achieved this. It was an all-hands-on-deck effort.

NUS moved rapidly to ensure academic continuity to give staff and students a sense of normalcy. This meant shifting teaching and learning to the online space seamlessly. We all know this wasn’t easy. Yet, with effort from all, the transition was relatively smooth. The NUS Open Day was similarly transformed. Usually, it’s attended by about 31,000 people. This year – because we went online – more than 3 million people browsed through websites, participated in ‘virtual campus tours’ and tuned in to livestreams and social media sessions. This is just one example. To find out what else we have done to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, [click here](#).

A large number of students has been experiencing financial difficulties. We set up an NUS Students Solidarity Fund in April. I am grateful for the generosity of alumni, staff and students. \$1.6 million was raised and we provided immediate support to 3,100 students. I am heartened that the NUS Students’ Union (NUSSU) has also provided support through the NUSSU Unity Relief Fund.

Then there is the psychological impact of COVID-19. Many students were anxious about getting jobs after graduating. Working closely with the Government, industry and our alumni, we launched the Resilience and Growth Initiative: (a) offering 1,000 full-time job positions and traineeships; (b) extending four free continuing education and training modules to fresh graduates; and (c) committing \$6 million to support 115 meaningful community-centric projects led by recent graduates.

I am proud that the NUS community carried out many acts of service, both planned and spontaneous. For example, NUS converted 28 blocks at Prince George's Park Residences (PGPR) to a Community Recovery Facility from May to July 2020. NUS students and staff put in considerable effort to give our guests a warm reception and make them feel comfortable – welcome videos in various languages, blogs in seven languages on information about PGPR, entertaining programmes, etc. And our community has done much [more!](#)

No matter how tough the conditions were, especially with stay home requirements, teaching and research continued. I am especially proud of how NUS researchers stepped up to be at the forefront, contributing to the national and international fight against COVID-19. Duke-NUS Medical School was the third institution in the world to culture the COVID-19 virus. cPass, a kit that detects whether a person has antibodies which neutralise the coronavirus, became the first of its kind to receive authorisation from the US' Food and Drug Administration. Breathonix Pte Ltd, a spin-off company from NUS, developed an easy-to-use breath test to detect COVID-19 within a minute. This game-changing technology, believed to be the first in Asia, achieved more than 90% accuracy in a Singapore-based pilot clinical trial that involved 180 patients. Even this [longer description](#) of our research efforts does not do justice to the immense work our researchers have accomplished!

Education is what defines us as a university. COVID-19 cannot and will not suppress our commitment to Singaporeans to see education as a lifelong pursuit. A Data Literacy Programme which hones data analytics skills was conducted for 4,300 Executive and Administrative staff across NUS. The first SkillsFuture Work-Study Degree Programme, in partnership with SkillsFuture Singapore and the Sea Group (a leading Internet platform in Southeast Asia) was also launched. These initiatives, and [several others](#), have a strong signalling effect for shifting mindsets.

NUS needs to constantly innovate, push boundaries and remain relevant. We have a duty to develop graduates who are adaptable and resilient to thrive in a complex and uncertain world. To this end, we will be reforming our educational model, by moving from a traditional disciplinary approach, to one that is flexible, broad-based and interdisciplinary. As you would be aware, the first major endeavour was the establishment of the [College of Humanities and Sciences](#), or CHS, jointly offered by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and Faculty of Science. In the near future, NUS will be rolling out initiatives to further revolutionise teaching and learning. We have a duty to ensure our students are as ready as possible for a brave new world.

In short, 2020 has been a year of reckoning. We were not short of challenges – COVID-19 health concerns, financial issues, administrative and operational dilemmas, not to mention the sexual misconduct cases we have had to deal with. It hasn't been easy. For me, a strong takeaway has been to put faith in our relationship with each other. Trust begets trust. The right thing to do is to take that leap of faith and share with openness and honesty.

It is my firm belief that 2020 – with all the ups and downs – has brought us all closer. We have learned to listen to each other more. We have come to understand each other better. Going through tough experiences together does deepen trust. You have my assurance that we will continue to build on what we have achieved. 2021 promises to be yet another challenging year. I am confident that we will march forward, more sure-footed and better prepared.

On this note, I am pleased to announce that 31 December 2020 and 4 January 2021 will be university holidays for all faculty, staff and students. This is to say a big thank you to each one of you for your commitment, dedication and support throughout this exceptional year. Let us all have a restful break, and return refreshed for the new year.

I wish you and your loved ones peace, good health, and a blessed new year!

With best wishes,
Professor Tan Eng Chye (Science '85)
NUS President