


**University Awards 2026**

**Speech by Professor Tan Eng Chye, NUS President**

**Friday 4 Sep 2026, 6.30 pm, University Cultural Centre**

NUS Pro-Chancellors Mr Po'ad Mattar, Mrs Theresa Foo, and Dr Noeleen Heyzer,

NUS Chairman Mr Hsieh Fu Hua,

NUS Trustee Mr Vincent Chong,

Award winners,

Colleagues, Guests and Friends

Good evening, and welcome to University Awards 2026.

We are gathered here to honour and celebrate outstanding members of the NUS community – nine of them today – who have shown consistently high performance and set new benchmarks.

Every year, we recognise such excellence not just to acknowledge these exceptional individuals, but to also inspire our wider community. The achievements of our award winners did not happen overnight. Over days, months and years, they chased nothing less than extraordinary, working tirelessly to break new ground in education, research, and service to society. Generation upon generation, the pursuit of excellence has been woven into our NUS identity. Today's award winners are the visible flag-bearers of that excellence; they are also a reflection of the ethos of the NUS community.

So how do we retain this culture, or better yet, enhance it? The answer is an enduring focus of our university: talent. Recruiting and nurturing top talent is foundational to excellence. Every year, we bring in world-class faculty and researchers into our fold, but this work is never-ending.

The quest for talent continues today, and recent developments are shaping this. It has been a banner year for our university; in March this year, six NUS School of Computing faculty were awarded grants under the Singapore Global AI Visiting Professorship. In June, it was announced that NUS would lead four projects under the new AI-for-Science national initiative – sweeping half of all the projects awarded. Also known as the AI4S programme and backed by S$120 million in funding, this programme aims to develop AI methods and tools to speed up scientific discovery. We expect this to cultivate a new generation of scientists at NUS.

These are tremendously exciting and promising developments — both a testament to our solid foundations and a marker of excellence still to come. Our world-class faculty continues to be recognised and cited across the globe, while assuming editorial leadership at highly respected journals.

AI is very much part of the conversation when we speak about talent – and how AI has reimagined education, research and innovation.

Shortly after ChatGPT was unveiled at the end of 2022, NUS launched an interim policy, the first of its kind among Singapore institutes of higher learning. We also formed an AI Community of Practice to set community standards for AI in teaching and learning. The NUS AI Institute was also set up for core AI researchers to work with other disciplinary researchers.

These initial moves have encouraged university-wide AI capability across our education and research.

First, education, or how we use AI to support learning.

In August this year, we announced our strategy to imbue AI into our educational experience. AI will feature prominently in our pedagogy – in how we teach and learn. AI capabilities will be built into each discipline with differentiated pathways to innovate and deep dive. Importantly, we continue to cultivate, sharpen and amplify the human capabilities of every student, even as AI accelerates the processing of knowledge.

Turning now to research.

AI has reshaped scientific research and discovery in unprecedented and unexpected ways. A notable example is the Virtual Lab, which was a paper published by a Nature journal, and this is an outstanding example of AI-human research collaboration by Stanford researchers. Human researchers essentially created “virtual scientists”, a team of LLM agents who work with top scientists and they collaborated in interdisciplinary research. The outcome was impressive, with 92 nanobodies generated in a matter of days, some of which were subsequently validated in the laboratory.

These efforts speak to a larger ambition that the global research community has been building towards.

As early as 2016, Hiroaki Kitano put forward the Nobel Turing Challenge, a call to develop a highly autonomous AI scientist capable of making major scientific

discoveries, some at Nobel Prize level, by the year 2050, in another 24 years. This is not simply a faster human researcher, but an explorer of the vast space of scientific hypotheses that no human career could ever fully cover.

This is the kind of bold vision and ambition driving our own research at NUS.

We are upping the ante with our very own Lab in the Cloud initiative. These are AI-powered automated labs where AI designs and executes experiments. Results are continuously fed back, refining and informing future predictions and creating rapid, precise, scalable experimentation. Lab efficiency could be multiplied by possibly a 100 or a 1000 times. This is the future of research, directed by humans and elevated by AI. How we train researchers, and how we train our PhD students will have to change.

We are also nurturing bilingual PhDs – experts in different disciplines who are also AI proficient – to run our newly established AI for Science (AI4S) gym. Like seasoned personal trainers, they are able to work with our Principal Investigators to collect, process and analyse huge datasets in their home labs. They will then train and deploy new AI models to discover patterns and feed these back to train the next cohort, becoming evangelists for AI in research.

Yet, even as we embrace AI, we must celebrate human excellence.

We do so this evening at the University Awards. Determination, endeavour, excellence. These are the very human traits that define the NUS spirit, qualities we look out for as we nurture talent and qualities that will anchor the next AI-powered chapter of NUS.

Congratulations to all our award winners. You have done us proud. Thank you.