Source: *The Straits Times,* pA12
Date: 4 July 2025

S'pore, NUS need to stay open to be a 'sanctuary for global talent'

Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Senior Minister of State for Health and Manpower Koh Poh Koon during the watering of a young tembusu tree at the launch of the National University of Singapore's 120th anniversary celebrations at Marina Bay Sands on July 3. ST PHOTOS: ARIFFIN JAMAR

Vivian says universities like NUS play a critical role amid volatile state of the world

Elisha Tushara
Correspondent

Universities like the National University of Singapore (NUS) play a critical role, given the current volatile state of the world, said Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on July 3.

Singapore and NUS need to be open and willing to work with people regardless of where they come from, in order to be a "sanctuary for global talent", he said, amid increased geopolitical tensions, such as the rivalries between superpowers, which have been accelerated by technological advancements.

He was speaking at the official launch of NUS' 120th anniversary celebrations held at Marina Bay Sands.

Dr Balakrishnan, an alumnus of NUS Medicine and a former president of the NUS Students' Union, said the increasingly tumultuous world will impact academia and science.

This will be seen in rising inflation, smaller countries becoming more vulnerable, and progress slowing down as a result.

Dr Balakrishnan used three metaphors – a cradle, citadel and launch pad – to describe the roles of NUS.

From its beginnings in 1905, NUS has "been an integral cradle for the development of national consciousness, national identity, national unity, independence and awakening", he said.

And as a "citadel with open gates", NUS should be a fortress while remaining open to talent and ideas, he added.

"NUS needs to have open gates, and we need to have our fair share of access to talent and ideas, while still remembering that this is a citadel based in Singapore, to protect Singapore."

Lastly, he said, NUS and other local universities must be a launch pad for new technological developments, for the pursuit of science and its applications, so that Singapore and Asia do not get left behind.

From its beginnings as a small medical school with just 23 students, NUS is now Singapore's flagship university with close to 390,000 in its alumni community.

Close to 1,900 alumni, industry leaders, and members of the NUS community attended the July 3 event, along with Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and Senior Minister of State for Health and Manpower Koh Poh Koon, who is an NUS Medicine alumnus.

NUS president Tan Eng Chye said the national university must recognise its role in developing curiosity, character and critical thought, and producing graduates who will uplift and transform society.

NUS president Tan Eng Chye said celebrating the university's 120 years alongside Singapore's 60 years of independence brings with it "a sense of symmetry".

"Our journey as the nation's oldest and first institution of higher learning has been interwoven into our nation building," he said.

Calling education an intrinsic part of Singapore's social compact, Professor Tan said a significant number of students and alumni from NUS are the first in their families to go to university.

In the last financial year, he said, NUS received a total of $233 million in philanthropic gifts. This includes $26 million for students from low-income families, a portion of which went to the Enhanced Financial Aid Scheme which benefits around 3,000 undergraduates yearly.

Prof Tan said NUS, as a national university, must recognise its role in developing curiosity, character and critical thought, and producing graduates who will uplift and transform society.

"Universities continue to face challenges, from technological disruption and geopolitical shifts, to questions about the value and purpose of higher education," he said.

NUS is also marking several milestone anniversaries in 2025, including the 120th anniversary of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, the 70th anniversary of NUS Engineering and the 20th anniversaries of Duke-NUS Medical School and NUS High School.

The largest university in Singapore with 15 colleges, faculties and schools across three campuses, NUS admits more than 7,000 undergraduates yearly, the majority of whom are Singaporeans.

Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, said NUS has graduated over 12,000 doctors, 3,000 nurses and many scientists.

He added that many alumni have gone on to be leaders in healthcare and society.

Examples include the late Dr Benjamin Sheares, who became the Republic's second president, and Dr Margaret Chan, former director-general of the World Health Organisation.

In the last decade, health and healthcare has become more complex, said Prof Chong in a speech at the July 3 event. This is due to factors such as extreme weather events, the promises and threats of technology and artificial intelligence, and the misinformation and disinformation spread by social media.

Despite advancements in medicine, science and technology, he said, prospects for a healthy and sustainable future are threatened by falling global fertility, ageing populations, attacks on science and even the carbon footprint of healthcare.

Warning that the world's health is in peril, Prof Chong said "a whole-of-society, whole-of-planet approach is required more than ever".

"We need the united efforts of people whose skills, diverse expertise and viewpoints can be brought to bear for a better and healthier future."

He added: "At NUS, what we do is critical – not just for Singapore, but for the world, and for our future."

elisha@sph.com.sg

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