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Veteran diplomats, tech pioneer receive honorary degrees from NUS

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Veteran diplomats Chan Heng Chee and Noeleen Heyzer, as well as tech pioneer Wong Ngit Liong, received honorary degrees from the National University of Singapore (NUS) on July 14.

The honorary Doctor of Letters degrees were presented by Education Minister Desmond Lee at the commencement ceremony for 99 graduates from NUS Business School, held at the University Cultural Centre.

The honorary degrees are the university's highest form of recognition for outstanding individuals whose service has had an impact in Singapore and globally.

Professor Chan is an NUS alumna who graduated with first-class honours in political science in 1964 when it was then known as the University of Singapore. She returned to do her PhD in 1974.

She was NUS' first female head of political science, before being appointed to lead the new Institute of Policy Studies in 1988.

In 1996, at the start of her 16-year stay in Washington as Singapore's UN Representative and Ambassador to the United States, Prof Chan deepened ties, culminating in the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement, which was signed in 2003.

In a citation, Professor Simon Chesterman, NUS' vice-provost and dean of NUS College, said that through her career transitions, from academic to diplomat and then public intellectual, Prof Chan brought together a rare combination of intellectual independence and global experience.

"Throughout her career, Ambassador Chan has helped to shape how Singapore understands itself and how Singapore is understood by the world... at a time when expertise is not always valued quite as much as it is needed," he said.

Prof Chan said that while students of her time were focused on being "present-ready" to grapple with political developments of the time, such as Singapore's separation from Malaysia, universities today have to prepare students to be "future-ready".

(From left) Veteran diplomats Chan Heng Chee and Noeleen Heyzer, tech pioneer Wong Ngit Liong and NUS president Tan Eng Chye at a commencement ceremony for graduates of NUS Business School on July 14. Professor Chan, Dr Heyzer and Mr Wong were presented with honorary Doctor of Letters degrees – the university's highest form of recognition for outstanding individuals whose service has had an impact here and globally – by Education Minister Desmond Lee. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

With unpredictability and volatility being the new normal in 2025, she said students need to also develop an interest in politics and geopolitics.

Addressing the graduands, she encouraged them to understand and follow what is happening in the world and locally, as it is crucial for their future.

"Going forward, geopolitics is an inescapable part of our future, and we should be prepared to ride it, to deal with it," said Prof Chan.

Fellow honorary degree recipient and NUS alumna Noeleen Heyzer was former under-secretary-general of the UN and the highest-ranking Singaporean in the UN system from 2007 to 2014.

A leadership pioneer for women, Dr Heyzer was the first woman from outside of North America to head the UN Development Fund for Women, and the first woman to serve as executive secretary of the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific since its founding in 1947.

Calling her a trusted voice in global governance, Associate Professor Leong Ching, NUS' vice-provost of student life and acting dean at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, said Dr Heyzer is a trailblazer for women's empowerment across the world.

"Her leadership has redefined the nature of power itself – as a force for dignity, inclusion and transformation," said Prof Leong.

Speaking at the ceremony, Dr Heyzer said she was blessed to be born and raised in Singapore, where social mobility was provided for many, including her and her family.

"The transformative role of education and the thirst for learning played a big part in my evolving life," she said.

She called on graduates to provide new leadership in a world filled with paradox and disruptions, but also immense possibilities.

Said Dr Heyzer: "We are not just inheriting an emerging new world order. We are called to co-create it."

Mr Wong, the final honorary degree recipient, is the executive chairman and founder of Venture Corp.

Since the company's inception in 1984, Mr Wong has led its evolution from a start-up in electronics manufacturing services to a globally recognised technology powerhouse.

In public service, Mr Wong has been on numerous national boards and committees, including the Economic Development Board, 2002 Economic Review Committee and Singapore Exchange.

In a citation, Professor Aaron Thean, NUS' provost and deputy president of academic affairs, called Mr Wong a "distinguished leader and pioneer in the global technology industry".

He added that as chairman of NUS' Board of Trustees from 2004 to 2016, Mr Wong was instrumental in driving major reforms that propelled NUS into the ranks of the world's top universities, and his leadership was crucial to the university's structural transformation.

Recounting NUS' transformation from 2005, Mr Wong said he was part of a team that toured top universities in the US, Europe and China to learn and exchange ideas.

Though foreign experts were invited to review local tertiary education strategy and curriculum, he said that after some years, they were no longer needed.

"We adopted best practices, learnt and leapfrogged to greater heights... We are so much more ahead of them that they now have to learn from us," said Mr Wong.

A total of 17,646 students will receive bachelor's or graduate degrees in 2025 from NUS at ceremonies taking place from July 10 to 21.

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CO-CREATING THE FUTURE

We are not just inheriting an emerging new world order. We are called to co-create it.

DR NOELEEN HEYZER, calling on graduates to provide new leadership in a world filled with paradox and disruptions, but also immense possibilities.

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