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Speech by Prof Tan Eng Chye, NUS President NUS University Awards 2022 29 July, 6.30pm, Shangri-La Singapore

Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, and Trustees

Award Recipients

Distinguished Guests

Colleagues and Friends

Introduction

1. University Awards is an important annual event where we gather to recognize individuals among us who have scaled peaks of excellence in education, research and service. The past two years, we have had to hold this event under the weight of Covid-19 and various safe management measures, I am especially glad that this time round, we are able to celebrate University Awards together in this wonderful setting, and I hope it will be a memorable occasion for all our award winners.

Excellence – a Core Value at NUS

2. Excellence is a core value and a hallmark of NUS. When my leadership team took the helm in 2018, we formulated a Strategy and Strategic Priorities document - the singular focus then was on Talent, Talent, Talent, and its role in driving excellence and innovation across all that we do. NUS raised recruitment standards - we brought in faculty from the best institutions in the world. In tandem, NUS mounted a suite of initiatives to develop a pipeline of Singaporean academic talent, and to nurture, support and develop faculty and staff to excel. For our student talent, NUS evolved a flexible educational model that develops them to their fullest potential in line with their interests, aptitudes, and, of course, their aspirations. Through a rich and transformative educational experience, our students become graduates who are lifelong learners, competent for the workplace and agile for the future.

2018 Strategy and Strategic Priorities

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3. The 2018 Strategy, with a strong focus on Talent, has served us well. Today, NUS is a top-ranked, research-intensive university with a global reputation for quality and excellence. Yet, in a continually evolving world, we need to be diligently and continually on the lookout, to make sure that our operating model, strategies and focus areas are current, valid and, of course, headed in the right direction. Like a Captain steering a large ship, the NUS leadership team cannot afford to go on auto-pilot. Though we may not have 20/20 vision of everything that is coming ahead, we look at the horizon, and make full use of the talents, resources and technology accorded. We then exercise acumen and make bold decisions to position and steer this ship forward.

Shaping the Future Strategy 2022 - 2027

4. Last year, the NUS senior leadership undertook a deep dive into what we would have to contend and confront with in a post-Covid world. Examples like digital transformation, shortened knowledge lifecycles and micro-credentialing are changing the way that education is being delivered. With a greater societal need for lifelong learning, NUS must prepare for a new mix of undergraduate and postgraduate student learners. Digital skills are a necessity for all our staff and students, and this must bear out in our course offerings. Our students and graduates need new skills to navigate this changing world; apart from technical skills, mental resilience and well-being are essential support structures.
5. As part of the strategy review process, together with the Board of Trustees and other stakeholders, we have formulated refreshed goals for each of the four core domains of education, research, innovation and enterprise, as well as administration. Briefly, NUS aims to nurture future-ready graduates through a transformative educational experience. Our educational model will feature hybrid learning within and beyond the campus, emphasise experiential as well as interdisciplinary learning, combine work or research with study, and offer global and regional learning experiences. On research, NUS will strive to achieve global leadership in more and multiple areas. We also aim to incubate many successful deep-tech start-ups and become a key node in the global innovation and enterprise ecosystem. As an organisation, our culture

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and orientation must be agile and forward-thinking. Collectively, these refreshed goals will take us one step forward in our vision to become a leading global university, shaping the future.

6. As is evident, in our next stage of advancement, NUS is looking into how we can **integrate domains**, rather than viewing them as individual domains. A collective, integrated organisation is a far stronger one which creates greater value; and as a system, it is not easily replicable.
7. We have termed the refreshed strategy and strategic priorities as the ***Shaping the Future Strategy***. But as you would appreciate, strategy papers are often lengthy; very comprehensive, but not always comprehensible. So instead of giving you a list of initiatives and action items, let me instead just share two important but distinctive dimensions of the refreshed NUS strategy that I hope will position NUS well to achieve excellence in this dynamic, ever-changing world.

Strategic Thrusts – Platforms and Partnerships

8. The first dimension is the strategic thrusts of **platforms and partnerships** and how they enable us to create **powerful synergies**. NUS is uniquely positioned to create, curate and convene platforms that bring together and connect talents, academia, industry, skills, funding, ideas and opportunities across education, research, innovation and enterprise. The platforms NUS creates are avenues for interactions to evolve into concrete action, and also to allow for breakthroughs.
9. Take research for example, NUS has created two sizable platforms in Smart Nation and in Material Science; each cluster is working on over \$1 billion worth of research grants. The clusters draw together academic researchers and students, industry and government entities to work on a wide range of issues from fundamental research to solving industry problems as well as commercial applications. The clusters also have access to cutting edge disciplinary expertise across many disciplines. NUS is planning to set up more of such platforms in areas such as Sustainability and Resilience which would include Food Resilience.

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10. Partnerships allow us to expand our reach, and some eventually evolve into platforms. Through the years, NUS has forged partnerships in education and research with more than three hundred universities across the world; we have also established four research institutes in China which are training more than 3,500 research scientists. Our network of 15 NUS Overseas Colleges and 8 BLOCK71 locations makes NUS one of the most global universities in the world. The breadth, diversity and geographical reach of our innovation and enterprise ecosystem are distinct to NUS; and helps to position us as a key node in this global innovation and enterprise ecosystem.
11. I hope we are all able to see how the themes of connections, networks, partnerships, platforms, integration, interdisciplinary teaching, learning and research, are interlinked and are mutually reinforcing. This is what will make NUS a deeper, richer and more sophisticated whole that is greater than the sum of each part. And by being a central node in this ecosystem, we are a key player and a vibrant centre of innovation in education, research and enterprise.

Strategic Foundations

12. The second dimension of this refreshed NUS strategy is the three strategic foundations or horizontals as it is sometimes called, that we want to build across and throughout NUS. These three foundations expressly underpin the domain work we do, and speak particularly to NUS as a large, diverse organisation operating in a fast-changing landscape. The Talent piece as articulated in the 2018 Strategy remains central. Our refreshed strategy has now added two more important building blocks, namely Leadership and Governance, and Mindset Alignment.

(i) Talent

13. Let me talk a little bit about talent. Talent is central to achieving excellence. The university is a community of talents – as iron sharpens iron, academic, intellectual,

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and social exchanges bring about new knowledge, new discoveries and new possibilities. NUS seeks to be an institution that inspires, supports, and nurtures talented individuals to bring their talents to the fore.

14. To this end, NUS will ramp up recruitment of top faculty at all levels and formalise a mentorship scheme for faculty to help them become world-class in this highly competitive academic world. NUS will also need different talents to help us achieve our manifold goals in teaching, continuing and lifelong education, industry-relevant education, research translation and more. We will develop a framework of excellence for various career tracks such as the practice and educator track; each track will have its own blend of excellence, with clear pathways for progression.

(ii) Leadership and Governance

15. The second foundation is Leadership and Governance. With increasing operational complexity, the demands on leadership and governance for a large organisation will become even more exacting. Strong leadership is vital in providing clear directions as we navigate change and complexity. To this end, the NUS leadership team must maintain close dialogue and partnership with our Board of Trustees, and with senior and middle leaders.
16. This dynamic operating environment will also require us to make bold, quick and decisive moves. Notwithstanding, our actions must always remain accountable, above board, and uphold robust corporate governance. Having a strong set of corporate governance policies and processes will give us the confidence as we execute our plans and initiatives.

(iii) Mindset Alignment

17. The third foundation is Mindset Alignment. The scale, breadth and depth of expertise across NUS accords us with many advantages. In fact, within Singapore, NUS has the largest community in terms of students, faculty, alumni and startups. But to realize

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the collective potential of NUS, we will need to be a **cohesive entity**. The senior leadership at NUS will thus pay greater attention and effort to communicating widely about the organisational vision, purpose and strategies, and to bring everyone onboard this voyage that we are on. The NUS ship comprising Faculties, Schools, Departments and units must be fully engaged, tightly aligned, to stay on course together as we ride the winds and waves of change.

Conclusion

18. This evening, I have had the opportunity to share with you, aspects of the refreshed NUS strategy that will put in NUS in good stead to reach for excellence. This trait of excellence must continue to define us individually, and as an organization. We challenge ourselves to do better, to seek out new methods and knowledge, and to scale greater heights. Through platforms and partnerships, we can extend our reach and possibilities. Talent, Leadership and Governance and Mindset Alignment are also central features that will guide and cut across all that we seek to do to advance education, research, innovation and enterprise, as well as administration.
19. In rounding up, I would like to once again, convey my heartiest congratulations to all the award winners. You have distinguished yourself in your respective fields and have flown the NUS flag high! The NUS community is immensely proud of you, and we are delighted to honour your accomplishments and contributions – this evening is for you. Thank you.