



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

**8 September 2023, 7pm**

Chairman

Distinguished Guests

Award Recipients

Colleagues and Friends

A very good evening to everyone.

University Awards is a happy and special occasion, where NUS recognises and celebrates with colleagues and members of our community who have reached peaks of excellence in research, education and service. Our award winners inspire us to press on and to reach for the high mark in whatever we set ourselves up to do. I am proud of what our award winners have achieved in their respective spheres.

### **NUS' Journey of Excellence**

Over the years, NUS has made steady progress in building a reputation for excellence as a leading global university. We have developed high standards and a robust system for appointments, promotions and tenure.

Each generation of leaders at NUS seeks to steer NUS further along this journey of quality, high standards and excellence. Earlier this year, NUS has seen several changes to the leadership composition. The transitions have been smooth and successful. This was made possible because of the rich pool of talent that NUS has developed and cultivated, from which

we are able to appoint capable, excellent, and dynamic leaders to lead and position NUS well for the future. It also speaks of the culture and environment at NUS which is committed to the pursuit of excellence – NUS seeks to not only be the best place to work, but also, the place where we can all do our best work.

NUS talent are well sought after by other top universities – our colleagues have received offers and overtures from other institutions. Some have chosen to pursue opportunities elsewhere, and we wish them well. Others are with NUS, contributing their talents in many ways; they are doing great work and are enjoying fulfilling careers. Notably, universities in Singapore look to NUS for top academic administrators to build and grow their institutions - nearly all the Presidents and Provosts of the six autonomous universities have spent a significant proportion of their careers at NUS.

### **Recruiting Academic Talent**

To ensure that we continue on this path of excellence, it is imperative for NUS to recruit and to develop a strong and deep pipeline of talents, for ourselves and more, and to strengthen our succession planning. Here, I would like to urge all Deans, Department Heads and colleagues to accord top priority to recruiting and developing academic talent.

Although there is intense competition from institutions across the world, NUS is well-placed to attract top academic talent. Singapore is an attractive destination to pursue an academic career. It is a safe and conducive place to bring up a family. Our healthcare system and other facilities are world-class. How Singapore handled Covid-19 has demonstrated our strength, capability, and resilience as a stable and dependable operating environment. Our strong economy also presents many opportunities for spouses and grown children to find good employment. Singapore also enjoys good relations and connectivity with the rest of the world.

### **NUS Values and Supports Academic Talents**

NUS too, has emerged strongly from the pandemic. We pivoted quickly to blended learning and kept research and education activities going. Singaporean and international student enrolment remained high, and our financials are strong and sound. Perhaps most importantly,

NUS is a talent-centric organisation that nurtures and supports academic talents to realise their aspirations and to achieve excellence.

Academic talents are given an excellent start-up package which allows them to seed and catapult their research projects. Apart from space and equipment, the start-up package allows for the hiring of postdoctoral researchers and students, even for early career academics. Second, in terms of infrastructure, NUS has some of the best-resourced laboratories and equipment in the region. Third, young academic faculty enjoy academic freedom to pursue their areas of interests independently. Fourth, NUS encourages and provides generous support and academic leave for our faculty to travel; to attend conferences, visit overseas universities, network and stay connected to academics and academic developments in their field. All in all, the policies and practices at NUS seek to support our academic talent to do their best work.

For Humanities and Social Science or HSS scholars, it is an exciting time to be in Singapore which is a gateway to Asia, especially if your field of work or research is on Asia. We also know it is important for HSS faculty to have time and space to concentrate on their writing; they are given semesters that are free of teaching so that they can concentrate on their monographs. For faculty in STEM disciplines, there is a vibrant, growing innovation and enterprise system to catalyse the translation and commercialisation of your research.

I would also add that in many fields, because of the density of Singapore as a city state, and the university's connections with government and with industry, the work of academic faculty can lead to real world impact. As an academic, you are held in high esteem by society, and are in a position to inform and influence policies and practices through your research and advice; there are many opportunities in Singapore to trial and test-bed ideas.

### **NUS Welcomes a Diversity of Talents**

Beyond tenure track talent, NUS also seeks to develop excellence in education, in practice, and in innovation and enterprise - we welcome diverse talents who are able to contribute towards these areas. In education, for example, we need faculty who are strong disciplinary teachers, as well as others who can lead in areas like technology-enhanced learning, interdisciplinary education and lifelong education. NUS is also seeking to grow the pool of

faculty who have strong interest in entrepreneurship and innovation, as well as those with strong industry and practitioner experience.

Diverse talents enrich and strengthen the NUS community and the university as a deep and comprehensive eco-system. Faculty who are on the Educator or Practice Track, can also enjoy fulfilling careers at NUS. Among the top universities, NUS is the only institution that provides a pathway to tenured professorship based on a peak of excellence in education. Educators who excel in education scholarship and spearhead innovative, transformative educational experiences can develop and progress in their careers at NUS.

### **Upping our Game in Recruiting Talent**

To bring in more talent to NUS, we will need to up our game in recruitment. Traditionally, our search process for talents takes the form of throwing and casting our nets wide. We place generic advertisements in university-recruitment sites and sometimes in top journals, while we hope and wait for interested parties to respond. This has been the modus-operandi for perhaps two decades or more.

But NUS today, is in a different position. Departments have matured; we know what excellence entails, and the talents we are targeting. Deans and Department Heads have a good sense of developments in their disciplines, the potential ground-breaking advances in the field, and the groups and researchers who are leading in these areas. Each of us knows, better than any search firm, who can complement, augment, and boost our expertise. We know who can enrich the classroom and learning experiences for our students; we know who the captains and leaders of industry are in our fields.

Rather than adopting a passive posture, NUS can now be more targeted and personalised in our recruitment, drawing on our networks and knowledge of the field. This will distinguish us from what other institutions are doing and help us to be more effective and persuasive in recruiting the talent we want. (The analogy is perhaps akin to moving from a dating app, to targeted courtship.)

### **Recruiting Talent – Adding a Personal Touch**

A personalised email is a good strategy to adopt. Most of us do not generally prioritise reading mass emails. On the other hand, we often read and re-read messages that are crafted to us, for us. A personalised email speaks of purpose and sincerity. I encourage Deans and Department Heads to identify talents in your disciplines whom the Department is keen to land. Write to them. Introduce yourself, the Department and NUS, as well as the many exciting opportunities that NUS, Singapore and the region offers.

This personal interaction is beneficial to the Department and the potential candidate in assessing interest, fit and suitability. Reading CVs online give a clear picture of a person's work and accomplishments. While this is important, we are hiring candidates for what they can achieve and contribute to NUS – it is thus necessary to find out what their inclinations and future aspirations are, and how we can create a match. There is where personal interactions come to play.

Sometimes, these proactive, customised emails can also lead to surprising, positive second order outcomes – talents whom we are targeting know that NUS is actively recruiting, and they can also point us to other suitable candidates, such as their former collaborators or research fellows. From our experience, candidates, especially the younger ones, do respond when Deans and Department Heads approach them personally to apply.

Courtship is a dynamic process, and sometimes, even with the best intentions and smooth processes, candidates may not eventually take up the offer. But we must take a longer-term view in how we approach talent – keep the relationship going. The right message goes out, that NUS values talent. Sometimes, these candidates join NUS subsequently, when the time is right for them.

Some of you may have been present at the farewell dinner for Professor Ho Teck Hua, where I recounted how it took years, and multiple trips to the US, to court him back to NUS. In the fullness of time, Teck returned to NUS. And we all witnessed how his rich experience with top US academic institutions, scholars and with industry, had come to bear. Teck was an outstanding Provost who raised the quality and depth of education, research and enterprise at NUS.

## **Enhancing Recruitment Policies and Processes**

As Deans, Department Heads and colleagues actively reach out to talents around the world, I would like to assure you that NUS is continually working to improve policies and the hardware side of things. One advantage that NUS has is that compared to some institutions with very entrenched policies and practices perhaps due to age or history, is that we can be more flexible, nimble and innovative in the way we address the needs and concerns of our talents. The Office of Human Resources is working closely with Faculty HR Leads to improve recruitment processes and touchpoints with candidates.

## **Conclusion**

I have spoken at length about the core value of Excellence, and how NUS must take this opportunity to attract, recruit and develop academic talent and to support them in their pursuit of excellence. As we seek to bring in more academic talent to NUS, I hope that in the years to come, there will be even more recipients of the annual University Awards.

This evening, we are very proud of the winners of University Awards 2023. They are the university's flag-bearers of excellence, and we want to recognise them for what they have accomplished. You will hear a short citation of each of them as they are presented with their awards. Our 2023 University Award winners have brought NUS one step further in our quest for quality and excellence. Even through the difficult years of the Covid-19 pandemic, they were determined, and stayed on the course.

On this note, I would like to congratulate all our award winners, and I wish everyone a pleasant evening. Thank you.