

NUS COMMENCEMENT 2019 COMMENCEMENT DINNER SPEECH

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Dining Hall, Ridge View Residential College, Kent Ridge Campus

It is wonderful to join you this evening, as the University concludes Commencement activities for 2019.

This period has been both hectic, and deeply rewarding for all involved. I would like to express my appreciation to our NUS staff who have worked tirelessly, and with great dedication, to ensure the smooth running of all ceremonies during this period. Your hard work made possible truly memorable celebrations for our graduates, their friends and their families. Over the past 9 days, we have handed degree scrolls to 11,127 graduates, of which 4,464 were post-graduates, and 6,663 were bachelor's, across 12 Schools and Faculties. For a simple comparison, when our predecessor institution, the University of Singapore, held its first convocation in 1962, a total of just 300 graduates were awarded their degree scrolls.¹

¹ <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=1997052301.htm>

This impressive rise in numbers over the past six decades reflects NUS' dynamic journey of growth and development. It is also broadly indicative of Singapore's transformation over the same period from a simple trading port to a complex, first-world economy, driven by science and technology, and deeply embedded in global flows of ideas and knowledge.

Education was the transformative ingredient that allowed our small island state to overcome the limits of size, population and geography, and which catapulted us into the global marketplace. Despite the fierce competition, we learned that not only could we survive, we have been able to compete and thrive, by being agile and responsive to emerging opportunities, and by successfully adapting to waves of change.

Education has become the defining pathway through which each generation of Singaporeans can strive to reach their fullest potential, and build a brighter future for themselves and their loved ones. It has proven itself a powerful catalysing agent for meritocracy, social mobility and community building.

It is therefore greatly heartening, that over the course of this Commencement period, we came to learn of many inspiring examples of

how education continues to transform lives and open doors of opportunity for our new graduates.

Out of these many stories, I would like to just highlight two areas where education has exerted a powerful, transformative impact.

The first is the growing embrace of lifelong education across our society, as a key means through which mid-career and mature workers can continue to upgrade, or acquire new skills and knowledge in a dynamic and fast-changing environment.

For Mr Kaneson s/o Machapu, obtaining an NUS degree was a long cherished dream. As a young man, Mr Kaneson had to join the workforce after getting his diploma, to help support his family. Starting as a Technical Officer at Jurong Power Station, he steadily worked his way to becoming Deputy Manager at Tuas Power Generation. With the support of his family, and his employers, Mr Kaneson was finally able to pursue his dream, and has graduated this year with a Bachelor of Technology (Chemical Engineering) with Honours, 28 years after first obtaining his diploma.

There is also the inspiring example of Mr Lim Huan Chiang. Mr Lim is the CEO of A-Smart Holdings Limited, and he is also heavily involved in community and charitable activities, where has actively promoted lifelong learning. As such, despite his busy schedule, Mr Lim did not hesitate when he was invited to take up the Master in Public Administration and Management programme at the NUS Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Juggling work, community, family and studies was no easy task, but true to his determined and committed spirit, Mr Lim took on the challenge whole-heartedly, and found time to serve as class monitor, and was also awarded the Dean's Leadership Award 1st Prize for the Master programme.

The second area I would like to highlight relates to the pivotal role played by strong, positive social networks in both supporting and enabling individual pursuits of learning, accomplishment and success. Social networks would include friends, families, organisations and mentors. In particular, mentors can play a special role in opening new pathways, and shaping the future directions and actions of our students.

Such was the experience of valedictorian Ms Sabrina Binte Mohamed Nezam Meah, who formed a rapport with Assistant Professor Elmie Nekma from the Department Of Communications And New Media. Assistant Professor Elmie Nekma helped shaped Ms Sabrina's development as a student, and broadened her perspective on possible career options in the media industry. With Professor Nekma's support, Ms Sabrina clinched an award as outstanding PR student in the 2019 PRISM awards, which is a national contest organised by the Institute Of Public Relations Of Singapore.

Ms Sabrina credited Assistant Professor's Nekma candid feedback on her strengths and weaknesses, as well as deep industry knowledge, in developing her confidence, and a clearer sense of future direction.

For Dr Wang Lei, valedictorian from Department of Political Science, her PhD candidature under the guidance of Professor M. Shamsul Haque became a learning journey in discovering and trusting her independence and discipline in research.

In addition, Professor Haque's sense of empathy and broad-mindedness made Dr Wang realise that, while the pursuit of knowledge was important, it was just as critical to develop a sense of generosity and curiosity

towards all members of our society who contribute in their own unique ways.

These two outstanding valedictorians learnt that their learning journeys became immensely enriched, and their perspectives broadened, through the guidance and sharing of experiences by their mentors.

Learning is a blend of individual effort, as well as strong social support. As our newest graduates entering the workforce, I hope you will take full advantage of expanded lifelong learning opportunities to continually upgrade and upskill, as well as contribute to the growth and development of others by sharing your knowledge and experiences. In this way, we will build a positive cycle of enablement, which will allow more members of our society to fulfil their aspirations, and realise their potential.

I welcome you as the newest members of our alumni, and take this opportunity to reiterate that you will always be welcomed in NUS. The relationship between an alma mater and her alumni is transitioning rapidly, from “once upon a time”, to lifetime learning partners, and we hope to have an opportunity to renew and strengthen our bonds before too long.

A toast to the Class of 2019!