Good Evening,

Earlier this evening, we marked with sadness, the passing of Dr Goh Keng Swee. Dr Goh was foremost among the architects of modern Singapore. He laid the foundations for many of the systems and things that we enjoy and perhaps take for granted today. Beyond that, he was a giant of a man, in intellect, conviction, action and influence.
I never had the honour of working under Dr Goh, but through speaking with others who had and reading about him, it is clear that he was a unique talent; a man who combined in one person, so many remarkable and distinctive qualities. Even as the NUS community honours his outstanding contributions, we are also proud that an alumnus of our University reached such rare heights of achievement in terms of service to country and society, and as a leader and individual.

Tonight, as we celebrate excellence at our University Awards, Dr Goh stands out as a beacon and inspiration for all of us.

This evening, I would like to share some reflections on what Excellence means for our NUS community.

Excellence is a word that is very widely used. We see it, for example, on the websites of almost all major universities.

Last year, as I was passing a very small town in Northern India called Rudraprayag, I saw a big signboard which featured the word Excellence very prominently. The signboard was an advertisement for the nearby Modern Institute of Technology or MIT for short.
The critical question for NUS is therefore this:

How should we define excellence? And more importantly, how do we ensure that we are truly pursuing and achieving excellence?

Let me start with education.

At a basic level, we could think about our University’s Educational Framework – that is the way we “organise” the teaching and learning experience.

NUS’ education remains defined by its rigour. Yet, over the past 10 years, we have also made our education much more broad-based and flexible. We launched numerous unique and distinctive global education programmes. We have created many academic pathways for our students, allowing them to pursue options that suit their interests and ability.
As a result, we have an excellent and future-oriented educational framework. I must acknowledge here the leadership of our first Provost Chong Chi Tat who initiated many of the changes and our current Provost Tan Eng Chye who brought them to the current high level of development.

This is a remarkable achievement, but we must do even more. This is because at the heart of it, university education is not about satisfying a set of course requirements no matter how innovatively they are packaged. It is about the development of those habits of mind and thinking, and of the qualities of the individual that go far beyond mastery of specific domains of knowledge.

I would include here: a questioning mind capable of critical thinking, zest for knowledge and discovery, effectiveness in cross-cultural and cross disciplinary settings, a spirit of enterprise and good communication skills. Personally, I would add the ability to enjoy new intellectual vistas that a good university education ought to open up.

To achieve these, I believe we need greater focus on at least two areas.

First, collectively and as individual teachers, to have a true and deep commitment, to such an educational philosophy and outcome.

I am glad that the ongoing work to reshape the curricula in several Schools, from Engineering to Medicine, from Business to Computing, is moving us strongly in this direction. In the Teaching Academy, we have another vital driver for positive change.

Second, to challenge our students, to take them out of their “comfort zone” both intellectually and as individuals. In my University Awards’ address last year, I spoke of the famous sculptor Michelangelo who was able to see in each block of marble, the statue hidden within.
In the same way, as educators, we must work to discover the latent talents of our students and help unleash the potential hidden within. This year’s senior management retreat produced many good ideas on how this might be achieved, which we intend to explore further.

But let me stress this crucial point: in the end, it is the individual teacher and the quality of the teacher-student engagement that matters the most. Our students remember and benefit most from teachers who have stretched them, inspired them, mentored them and who have helped them to grow. Tonight, the Outstanding Educator Awards recognise the passion, commitment and achievements of some of the best teachers in our community.

But it also serves to remind us of the central role of the excellent teacher and the importance of his or her commitment to education. This will fundamentally determine if we can achieve true excellence in education.
I would like to turn now to excellence in research; and to start by acknowledging the role of Deputy President Barry Halliwell who has ably led our thinking in this area.

Peer recognition remains the most important basis for assessing research excellence. However, we are witnessing the rise of bibliometrics which places greater reliance on “measuring” the scholarly impact of research by counting the number of times other scholars cite a researcher’s work and the impact factor of the journals the article is published in.

Bibliometrics does indeed have a role in evaluating research. But, at the end of the day, we should not blindly rely on bibliometrics to assess research excellence, and achieving a high citation-count must not become an end in itself.

In March this year, I had the pleasure of discussing this issue with Professor Aaron Ciechanover, who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2004. Professor Ciechanover agreed that bibliometrics is useful. But he felt strongly that it is crucial that we still rely on peer assessment and judgement to assess the value of new research findings. In his own case, he noted that two key papers that helped earn him the Nobel Prize were published in solid journals but not the ones with the highest impact factor or citations.
In assessing research excellence, therefore, the most critical question should be: Why are these research findings important? Have they defined or re-defined thinking in the field? Have they established new paradigms and opened up exciting new lines of inquiry? Have they led to major breakthroughs in application?

We should bear in mind that some of the most innovative work cuts across disciplines and may therefore be hard to assess. We should also remember that the most ground-breaking work often runs counter to the prevailing academic orthodoxy and their true impact and significance may only emerge over time.

In short, to assess research excellence, we should certainly look at where the research is published, the citation count and other well-known parameters that point to strong peer recognition of the work of a researcher. But these are all markers to help us answer the central question: why is this research important and of high impact?

Our University exists to create distinctive new value – for our students and the wider community through excellent education, and for the advancement of knowledge and of society through excellent research. In addition, we can also bring great value when members of the NUS community provide outstanding service to Singapore and beyond.

This evening, NUS is proud and honoured to recognise Adjunct Professor J Y Pillay, through our Outstanding Service Award.
As we have heard, Professor Pillay has distinguished himself in many different sectors and ways, making invaluable and sustained contributions to community and country. We also celebrate and hold up the values and qualities that he so strikingly exemplifies – a deep sense of mission and duty to serve, an insistence on excellence in everything he does, and true humility despite his many accomplishments.

This evening, we recognise and applaud the eight exceptional individuals of the NUS community, who stand out amidst the greater pool of talent in our University. Our award recipients’ passion, achievements and values inspire and set new standards for us. On behalf of our University, I extend my warmest congratulations to all of them!
Finally, friends and colleagues, as we celebrate the individual accomplishments of our Award winners, we also celebrate the teamwork, collegiality and collective action which has enabled our University to pursue and achieve true excellence. Together, we share a common vision and responsibility to move our University strongly upward by achieving true excellence – and to become a leading global University centred in Asia.

Thank you.