

Traditions of Commencement

2025



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY *of* SINGAPORE



President's Message



Dear Graduates,

Congratulations on your upcoming Commencement! Your years of diligence and perseverance have finally come to fruition, leading us to this moment of celebration.

As you embark on a new chapter of life, I ask that you take a moment to look back on your time at NUS. There were challenges, triumphs, learning, and growth—from navigating COVID restrictions to managing the different aspects of university life, and adjusting your routines and habits as in-person social interactions resumed. Take immense pride in having overcome those trials; you have emerged as a stronger, more resilient, and indomitable individual.

Through the interdisciplinary and transformative educational experience at NUS, you have acquired a solid academic foundation, along with the capacity for critical thinking, the ability to solve complex problems, and the skills to collaborate effectively with persons from diverse backgrounds.

Global and experiential programmes—from student exchange and study trips to programmes like NUS Overseas Colleges and the Southeast Asia Friendship Initiative—have allowed you

to explore new perspectives, push your boundaries, and develop lifelong skills. Additionally, out-of-classroom activities have paved the way for you to pursue your passions in the arts, sports, or community engagement. I believe that such holistic development has prepared you well to take on the world, whatever it may bring.

With the global landscape today marked by uncertainty and a grim economic climate, there are many unknowns. The path ahead may be rough. To keep anxiety and frustration at bay, I suggest viewing life as a journey of discovery and adventure—you don't always need to have a perfect plan in place. Having a strong sense of purpose will also help give you the clarity of mind and fortitude to steer through unexpected turns and difficult times. It will imbue your actions with weight and meaning. Even in the face of adversity, there is always room for hope and optimism. Finally, embracing a growth mindset and committing to continuous learning will ensure that you remain adaptable and competitive in the workplace.

This year marks a significant milestone as we celebrate NUS' 120th anniversary—a testament to 120 years of excellence, innovation, and community building. On behalf of the entire NUS community, I extend our heartiest congratulations and welcome you to the NUS alumni family. As you move forward with purpose, passion, and confidence, you join a legacy of dreamers, changemakers, and trailblazers to shape a better future for all.

With warmest wishes for your continued success,

Professor Tan Eng Chye

President, National University of Singapore





University Chancellors



Eleven Chancellors have presided over graduation ceremonies since the University's beginnings, awarding degrees to generations of graduates. Each has passed the baton to the next with both pride and humility—pride in our graduates' accomplishments, in the University's growth, in the role the University plays in the development of the nation; and humility in knowing that the work and potential of NUS is never-ending.



Malcolm John MacDonald
From 1949 to 1961



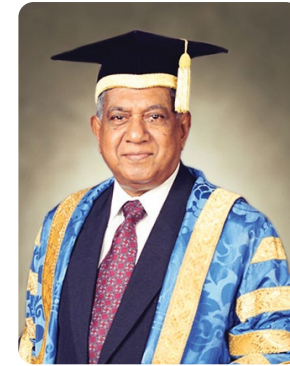
Lee Kong Chian
From 1962 to 1965



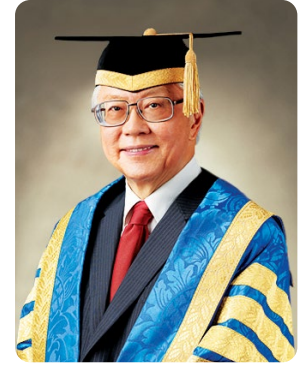
Yusof bin Ishak
From 1965 to 1970



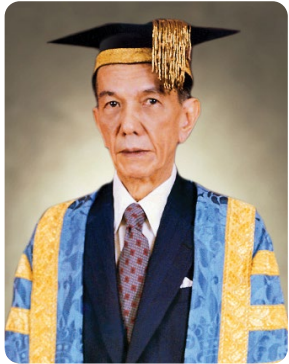
Ong Teng Cheong
From 1993 to 1999



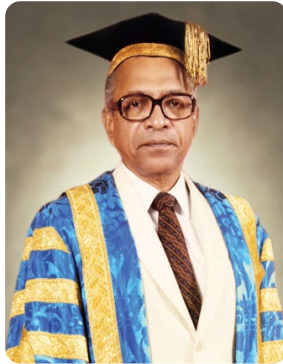
S R Nathan
From 1999 to 2011



Tony Tan Keng Yam
From 2011 to 2017



Benjamin Henry Sheares
From 1971 to 1981



C V Devan Nair
From 1981 to 1985



Wee Kim Wee
From 1985 to 1993



Halimah Jacob
From 2017 to 2023



Tharman Shanmugaratnam
From 2023 to Present



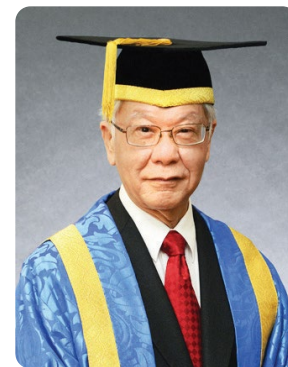
University Pro-Chancellors



University Pro-Chancellors were introduced in 1949 during the days of the University of Malaya. The Pro-Chancellors may be authorised by the Chancellor to act on his or her behalf, and preside at the annual commencement ceremonies. We currently have six Pro-Chancellors.



Gautam Banerjee



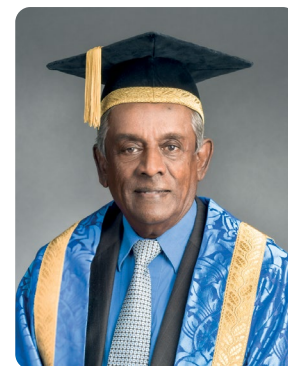
Chan Sek Keong



Theresa Foo



Po'ad Mattar



S Jayakumar



Teo Siong Seng



A Mission to Serve



NUS began over a century ago as a modest medical school with 23 students, to serve a powerful purpose: be a place of higher learning for talented men and women in Singapore who would serve the nation and society.



1905

The Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Government Medical School is established.

1913

The School is renamed the King Edward VII Medical School, making it the first institution of higher learning in Singapore.

1921

The status of the Medical School is elevated to become the King Edward VII College of Medicine.

1928

Raffles College is established to provide tertiary education in the arts and sciences.

1949

Raffles College merges with the King Edward VII College of Medicine to form the University of Malaya, the very first university for the peoples of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya.

1955

Nanyang University, a privately funded Chinese university, opens its doors.

1962

The Singapore campus of the University of Malaya becomes an autonomous institution known as the University of Singapore.

1980

The National University of Singapore is established with the merger of the University of Singapore and Nanyang University.

The Mace

Based on a mediaeval European tradition, the mace is a symbolic torch representing the light of knowledge. Signifying authority and enlightenment, the mace is usually borne at the head of the procession.





Traditions that Grow with the Nation

A convocation, we maintain, is the fitting culmination of a successful College career.

Mr Cheong Hock Hai, Editor of Raffles College Union Bulletin editorial, 1936

Mr Cheong Hock Hai's view about the significance of convocation or commencement being "stimulants" to undergraduates is as valid and meaningful today as it was decades ago.

To look back at the core traditions and changing nature of the National University of Singapore commencement is to reflect and understand over a century of Singapore history.

Speeches about service to nation, the call to be humble, and a celebration of Singapore's

many cultures continually spiral up through our commencement history. Academic regalia and graduates' style of dress, size of the events, venues and post-graduation festivities all reflect an institution coming into its own. Certainly, the footsteps of the men and women who have walked across the stage to receive their scrolls echo in the footsteps of current graduates.

Today's commencement ceremonies are vastly different from those that came before. Yet their power lies in the history they carry forward.

DARING TO DO

The spirit of self-reliance, daring to think and daring to do. These are the qualities which we hope will be transmitted from one generation to another...

Dr Toh Chin Chye, University of Singapore Vice-Chancellor (1968-1975), Convocation 1969

On 1 June 1910, the medical college that would become NUS many years after, held its first graduation ceremony. The Straits Times reported, "today is one of the proudest days" because the new medical college "send[s] their firstborn into the world."

The success of the school that was honoured that day was due in some measure to the liberality of businessman and civic leader Mr Tan Jiak Kim and the Chinese community. They had started the college on their own initiative and carried it through themselves.

Following that momentous beginning, little is known about how the medical school commemorated graduations. Most likely, they were small ceremonies with fewer than a dozen graduates. There certainly were no processions of men and women in robes, no ceremonial roll call of graduates as they walked on stage to shake hands with a luminary, and no balloons cascading from the ceiling.

During the 1930s, convocations were held on campus. Notably, the 1935 ceremony included 100 guests and took place in the elegant College of Medicine building, followed by refreshments on the college lawn.

In 1928, parallel to the growth of the medical college, Raffles College was founded to offer programmes in the arts and sciences. While Raffles College held only two convocations prior to merging with the medical college, there was a tradition of graduating students posing for photos on their graduation day with faculty

dressed in academic robes. Students celebrated on their own with annual graduation dinners and balls hosted by the Raffles College Student Union—a tradition that continues today. Even though convocation ceremonies were private and exclusive affairs then, there was recognition of an achievement, and that the moment should be celebrated and cherished.

In 1949, Raffles College and King Edward VII College of Medicine merged to form the University of Malaya, the very first university for the peoples of Singapore and the Federation of Malaya.



Academic activities at Raffles College and the King Edward VII College of Medicine were suspended during World War II from 1942 to 1945.



First graduation of The Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Government Medical School in 1910

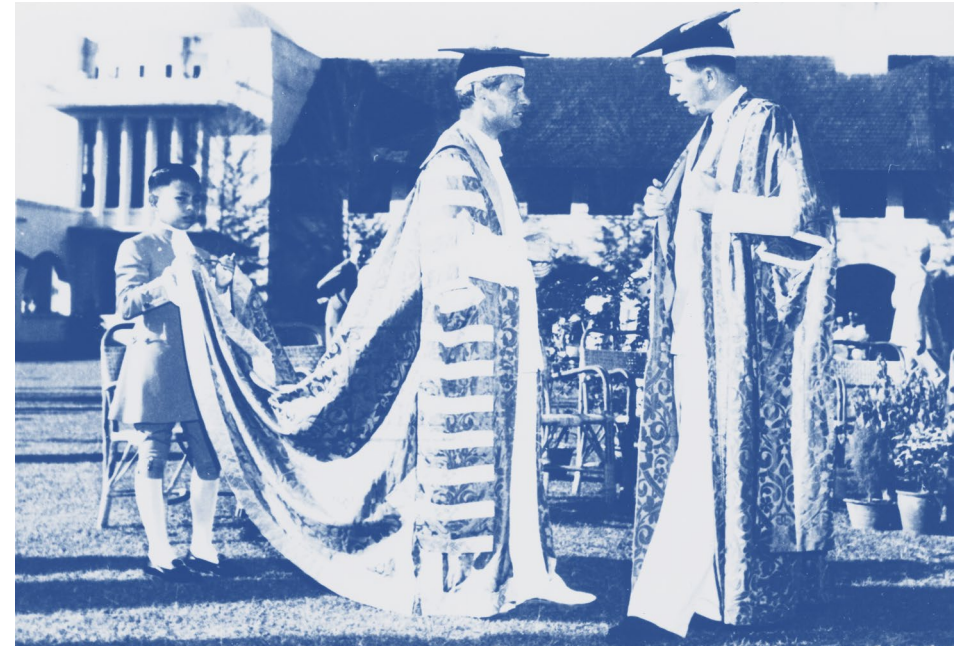


THE FIRST UNIVERSITY



A degree is a beginning, not a conclusion—
an opening, not a closing, to a career.

Mr Malcolm MacDonald, University of Malaya Chancellor (1949–1961), Convocation 1950



First convocation of the University of Malaya on 8 July 1950

The founding of the University of Malaya meant that for the first time there was a full-fledged university in British Southeast Asia. The University held great symbolic importance for the region, loudly proclaiming not only the end of World War II, but also the beginning of a new transitional era in soon-to-be post-colonial Malaya.

The undertone of the convocation speeches then was that the new university would be an essential building block of post-war Malaya, and that

self-rule was an eventuality that the University would play a significant part in bringing about. This undertone would continue to resonate in convocation speeches for many years to come.

With this first university came the academic pomp and circumstance that British professors and community leaders, as well as the educated local population, knew from the United Kingdom. The venerable traditions of the University of Oxford and the University of London acted as a template.



University of Malaya convocation held in Kuala Lumpur in 1957

It was at this time that the traditions of convocation ceremonies that still exist today were inaugurated. The use of academic dress, such as gowns and hoods, a university mace and an Esquire Bedell, as well as the order of procession and ceremonial roll call of graduates, all began with the formation of the University of Malaya.

With much pageantry and colour, the first convocation was held on 8 July 1950 at Oei Tiong Ham Hall at Bukit Timah Campus. The highlight came with the conferment of arts and sciences degrees of the University's first 69 graduates who went up to the Chancellor one by one as their names were called by the dean of their faculty. The men wore lounge or light suits, the women wore Western or traditional dress. After the speeches, the procession moved out of the hall to an informal tea in the sun-splashed quadrangle, where the Police Band played and the graduates received overwhelming congratulations.

In 1962, the University of Singapore held its inaugural convocation, which also marked the installation of its first Chancellor, Dato Dr Lee Kong Chian, the first native Singaporean to be given this singular honour. The ceremony opened with a rousing fanfare by the Police Band to mark the arrival of the academic procession before a full house at the Victoria Theatre.



In the early 1960s, women graduates often chose to wear their finest white cheongsams at convocation ceremonies so that the high neck of the dress would be dramatically set against the dark hues of the gown. White heels provided an elegant finishing touch.



COMING FULL CIRCLE



The University itself has grown in stature. It is with satisfaction and pride for all concerned to look back in perspective and take note of the progress made in the past few years.

Professor Benjamin Sheares, University of Singapore Chancellor (1971–1981), Convocation 1971

On 26 November 1965, a few months following the creation of Singapore as a sovereign nation, the President of the new Republic, Encik Yusof bin Ishak, assumed the position of Chancellor of the University of Singapore. During his first convocation speech as Chancellor, Encik Yusof emphasised the importance of the University to society.

Given the general turbulence of that era into which the Republic was born, it is not surprising that by the end of the decade the convocation speeches would focus on the larger role that graduates should play in Southeast Asia.

The core ceremony as devised under the University of Malaya remained in place throughout the time of the University of Singapore with one important difference: a full-circle return to more intimate graduations.

In the earliest days of the University, when the number and type of degrees granted were fairly small, it was easy to fit the graduation ceremony into a single day. More and more students graduated each year, yet the ceremony remained largely unchanged since the first days of the University of Malaya.



President Yusof bin Ishak (second from left) at a convocation ceremony of the University of Singapore

As the student body grew from a few hundred in the 1950s to over a thousand by the 1970s, the celebrations became daunting hours-long affairs. The 1974 convocation was, up to that point, the largest, longest and most tedious of them, starting at 2pm and ending only around 11pm.

In 1975, the concept of the “mini-convocation” was adopted. The venue was changed to the enclosed, air-conditioned Singapore Conference Hall, as the National Theatre had become too small to accommodate the increasing size of the ceremony. A more personalised sense of occasion returned as convocations were divided by faculty and took place over several days.

1976 was the first year that official gowns were issued to faculty who were seated on stage. It was also the first time that guest speakers were invited by individual faculties to address graduates at the ceremonies. Many convocation

speeches during this time served to remind the new graduates that material success alone cannot be equated with happiness.

The merger of the University of Singapore with Nanyang University in 1980 to form the National University of Singapore led to NUS holding its first convocation in 1981.

A total of six ceremonies took place over two weekends with 2,187 graduates receiving their degree scrolls. The Straits Times quoted then Vice-Chancellor Professor Lim Pin as saying that “it was certainly not the convocation of a novice university groping and trying to find its feet.”

The NUS convocations would soon become even larger and more sophisticated, with ceremonies taking place at Kallang Theatre from 1986.



Commencement ceremonies are a highlight for NUS graduates as they look forward to a new chapter of their lives

As new technologies gained prevalence in the last decade of the 20th century, convocation ceremonies soon welcomed the use of video backdrops, live video transmission of speakers, and webcasts of ceremony proceedings.

The year 1997 saw the introduction of valedictory speeches at the end of ceremonies. Over time, new themes emerged in convocation speeches, with a growing emphasis on responsibility for the environment.

For much of NUS’ history, graduation ceremonies remained the solemn British-style convocations envisioned by the leaders of predecessor universities. But in 2000, NUS shifted to a more American-style commencement, celebrating the graduates themselves and their lifelong links to the University.

It also marked the first year, since the days of Oei Tiong Ham Hall at Bukit Timah Campus of the University of Malaya, that a convocation ceremony took place on university grounds—at the University Cultural Centre.

The procession would now be larger, the music more stately, and the atmosphere festive with a balloon drop signifying the end of the ceremony. Behind the pomp and pageantry of these ceremonies, a holistic tracking system is employed to ensure each ceremony proceeds smoothly from start to end—from graduate attendance, queue ordering for stage presentation, display of details for stage reading and screening, to degree scroll collection.

In many ways, the sheer scale and magnificence of today’s ceremonies mirror the growth of NUS and Singapore.

Could Mr Tan Jiak Kim and his friends, who pooled their resources to found the medical

school from which we would spring, have imagined what NUS is today? Unlikely. Yet, how proud they would be to have set in motion a university that many around the world now see as one of the world’s best. Surely, they would see in the history of our commencement rituals the long road of our nation’s hopes and dreams.



This year, we celebrate the achievements of the Class of 2025 through 35 in-person commencement ceremonies.

The Class of 2025 comprises 17,569 NUS graduates—7,797 receiving undergraduate degrees and 9,772 receiving graduate degrees.

They will be inducted into NUS’ extensive network of alumni and luminaries around the world.

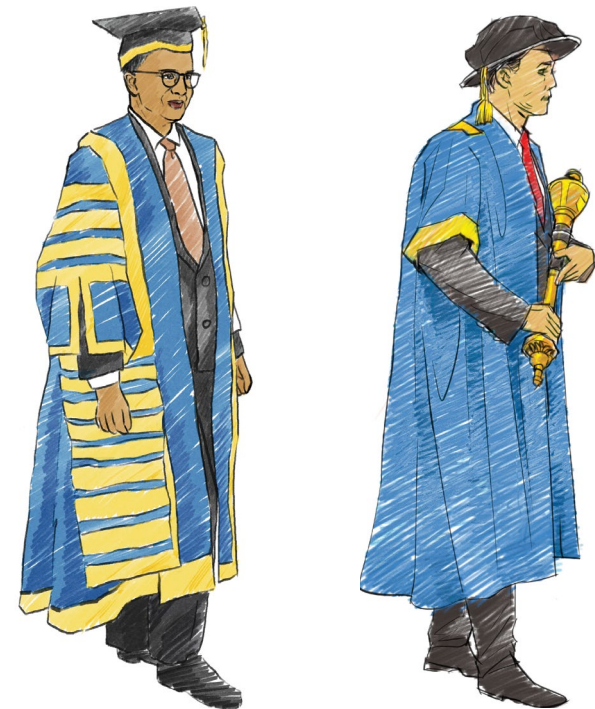


Upholding Our Ceremonial Heritage

The colours and style of academic regalia date to the middle ages and the ecclesiastical roots of European academia. The pageantry of the commencement ceremony, which includes the order of procession, carrying of the university mace, and distribution of scrolls, is modelled after the universities of Oxford and London.

ORDER OF PROCESSION

The order of procession reflects the relative importance of those in the procession, such as ministers, foreign dignitaries and emeritus professors. However, regardless of the importance of the other persons in the procession, tradition dictates that the Chancellor—a role which has been taken up by every State President since 1965—must be the last person to enter the hall and be seated.





Chancellor

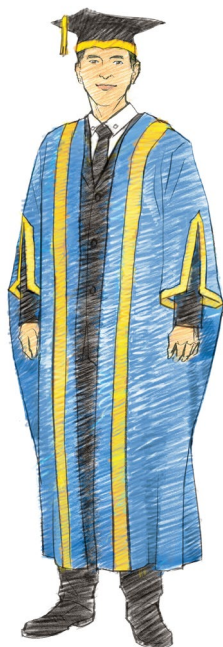
The Chancellor has the authority to confer degrees and presides over the main commencement ceremony.

The Chancellor's gown is made of damask blue silk accented with gold lace trim on the front, back, sides, sleeves and flap collar. Most striking are the twelve strips of gold lace running from the sleeve down each side of the gown.

Pro-Chancellor

The University Pro-Chancellor may act on behalf of the Chancellor and preside at the annual commencement ceremonies.

The Pro-Chancellor's gown is made of damask blue silk with gold lace trim on the front, sleeve slits and flap collar.



President

The University's President, or Vice-Chancellor, assumes responsibility for the day-to-day running of the University and delivers the keynote speech at the first ceremony.

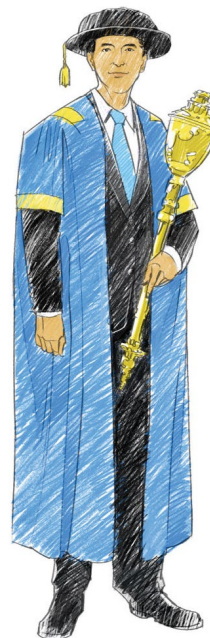
The President's gown is made of damask blue silk with gold lace trim on the front and sleeve slits.



Esquire Bedell

The Esquire Bedell is an honorary position appointed by the University for each annual ceremony. Previously in charge of the ceremonial dress in the British university system, the Esquire Bedell at NUS today carries the university mace and precedes the Chancellor in the order of procession.

The Esquire Bedell's gown is made of damask blue silk with gold lace trim on the flap collar and arm openings.





NUS ACADEMIC DRESS



The NUS academic dress consists three components—gown, hood and cap.

Gown

Like most universities in the English-speaking world, the style of academic dress at NUS reflects the ecclesiastical roots of European academia. The design of academic regalia for NUS graduates is modelled after those of the University of Oxford.

In the University's early days, gowns were manufactured in London. As the student population grew, the University worked with gown makers in Singapore.

Hood

The hood is not merely decorative but functions as the main indicator of academic status and achievement. In line with British tradition, the colour and design of the hood at NUS signify the type of degree earned and the faculty of the graduate.

Cap

The cap, or mortarboard, combines a courtly square bonnet and an ecclesiastical skull cap. Like gowns and hoods, caps also reflect the degree level of the wearer. For example, an NUS Doctor of Philosophy graduate wears a round cap of black cloth, with a cord and tassels of the degree colour.

Honorary Degrees

Honorary degrees were first conferred by the University of Malaya in 1950, and continue to be awarded by NUS. There are currently four categories of honorary degrees: Doctor of Laws, Doctor of Letters, Doctor of Medicine, and Doctor of Science.



Bachelor's academic dress



Doctoral academic dress



Honorary academic dress



DEGREE COLOURS



Under the system of degree colours, each degree awarded by the University is represented by a specific hood colour.

Architectural Conservation/Urban Design	Architecture#	Architecture/Industrial Design*	Architecture/Industrial Design#
Arts	Business Administration	Business Analytics	Clinical Investigation
Computing	Dental Surgery	Doctor of Medicine (Duke-NUS)	Doctor of Philosophy
Doctor of Philosophy (Duke-NUS)	Engineering	Environmental Studies	International Affairs
Information Technology	Integrated Design	Laws	Medicine/Public Health
Music	Nursing	Pharmacy	Professional Doctorate
Project and Facilities Management	Public Administration	Public Administration and Management	Public Management
Public Policy	Real Estate	Science	Social Sciences
Technology*	Technology#	Urban Planning	Bachelor of Arts Bachelor of Science (Yale-NUS)

* Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Each degree colour shown is a close representation of the actual hood colour.



Honour Roll



Over 60 illustrious luminaries have been conferred honorary degrees since NUS came into being in 1980. The honorary degree is the University's highest tribute to outstanding individuals who have rendered distinguished service, and greatly impacted both NUS and Singapore.

Doctor of Laws

Sundares Menon	2024
Tony Tan Keng Yam	2023
His Majesty Sultan Ibrahim	
Ibni Almarhum Sultan Iskandar	2022
Tommy Koh	2022
YAB Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad	2018
Chao Hick Tin	2018
Halimah Yacob	2016
Goh Chok Tong	2015
Lee Kuan Yew	2013
Chan Sek Keong	2010
His Majesty Sultan Iskandar	
Ibni Almarhum Sultan Ismail	2007
His Majesty Sultan Haji Hassanah	
Bolkiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah	2005
Yong Pung How	2001
Ali Alatas	2000
Paul J Keating	1999
J Y Pillay	1996
Sir Paul Girolami	1993
Radius Prawiro	1993
Keith Ashley Victor Mackrell	1991
Tan Chin Tuan	1991
General Prem Tinsulanonda	1989
Mochtar Kusuma-Atmadja	1988
David Saul Marshall	1987
Michael Y O Fam	1986
Siddhi Savetsila	1985
Tan Teck Chwee	1985
Arumugam Ponnu Rajah	1984
Chi Owyang	1983
Ismail bin Mohamed Ali	1982
Lim Kim San	1982
Maurice Baker	1981
Haji Ya'acob bin Mohamed	1981

Doctor of Letters

Chan Heng Chee	2025
Noeleen Heyzer	2025
Wong Ngit Liong	2025
Her Royal Highness Princess	
Maha Chakri Sirindhorn	2025
Peter Ho Hak Ean	2024
Wang Gungwu	2022
Oon Chiew Seng	2020
Chua Thian Poh	2019
Klaus Schwab	2017
Gerard Ee	2017
Ban Ki-moon	2016
Saw Swee Hock	2015
S R Nathan	2012
Philip Yeo Liat Kok	2011
Lee Seng Tee	2009
Wee Cho Yaw	2008
Li Lanqing	2006
Shaw Vee Meng	2003
Lee Seng Gee	2002
Ng Eng Teng	1998
Sydney Brenner	1995
Wee Kim Wee	1994
Lien Ying Chow	1992
Choo Hoey	1989
Athol Sprott Carrington	1984
Cheong Siew Keong	1982
Carlos Pena Romulo	1981
Yeoh Ghim Seng	1981

Doctor of Medicine

Arthur Lim Siew Ming	1999
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Doctor of Science

Margaret Chan Fung Fu-Chun	2021
Sir Richard Sykes	2015



Timeless Advice



What does one say to newly minted graduates to inspire, to counsel, to caution, to offer the benefit of one's wisdom and experience? While every commencement speech is specific to its era, the best advice endures—as relevant to today's graduates as those who have come before them.



ADVERSITIES IN LIFE

*I regret not the adversities in my life.
They are the beacons that guided
me, toughened me up and taught me
the meaning of life.*

Madam Halimah Yacob
Singapore's eighth President;
NUS Chancellor (2017-2023);
2016 Honorary Doctor of Laws



BECOMING GREAT

*It only requires a few good
men to make a nation great.
Will you be among them?*

Mr Chan Sek Keong
NUS Pro-Chancellor;
2010 Honorary Doctor of Laws



ADVANCING HUMANITY

*The way our university strives to keep
our humanity always in our sights
is something to be proud of. I hope
that all of us, no matter where life
leads, will never hesitate to help our
university to enhance this capacity to
advance our human condition.*

Professor Wang Gungwu
2022 Honorary Doctor of Letters



FACING CHALLENGES

*Singapore in the future will face
new challenges, and so will you
personally. But you will also find, as
I did, that wrestling with difficulties
helps you grow as individuals.*

Mr S R Nathan
Singapore's sixth President;
NUS Chancellor (1999-2011);
2012 Honorary Doctor of Letters



BE THE CHANGE

*Be the agent of change. Apply what
you have learnt and share your
knowledge. Build networks through
dialogue and cooperation in art and
culture, science, and innovation.*

Dr Margaret Chan Fung Fu-Chun
2021 Honorary Doctor of Science



PASSION AND CARE

*It is time to be excited; to be
passionate and caring for our nation,
our people and our world.*

Chief Justice Sundares Menon
2024 Honorary Doctor of Laws



Education has been critical to the growth and success of Singapore.

I hope that Singaporeans will continue to seek out an education that nurtures them to think critically and innovatively to meet the diverse and complex challenges ahead.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew

Singapore's founding Prime Minister;

2013 Honorary Doctor of Laws

NUS120
CELEBRATING THE PAST.
SHAPING THE FUTURE