

**Speech by Professor Shih Choon Fong  
President, National University of Singapore  
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**A TIDE IS UPON US**

**Sea-Change**

A tide is upon us. This tide is rising. And, we will either be engulfed, or be invigorated by it.

A sea-change is happening in universities around the world. For much of the previous century, Asia seemed to be an endless source of brainpower for the West. With an increasingly connected world, the tide has begun to turn. Rising Asian economies – China, India, even tiny Singapore – have entered the game. They are also on the hunt for global talents. No university has a monopoly on talent, as top academics move from the moribund to the dynamic places. Top universities cannot take their standing for granted.

As other knowledge institutions set up shop in Singapore, competing for students, faculty and research dollars, NUS no longer has the monopoly on any of these.

*National Research Initiatives*

Take the recently announced Research Fellowship Scheme set up by the National Research Foundation (NRF)<sup>1</sup>. Funding of up to \$2.8 million<sup>2</sup> over three years will be given to any top post-doc fellow from any where in the world, who chooses any knowledge organization here in Singapore. If they choose NUS, it represents an opportunity to build programs of excellence. If they don't, each NRF Fellow who goes elsewhere represents a double blow to your programs.

The NRF's Campus for Research Excellence and Technological Enterprise (CREATE) is another case in point. CREATE, a billion dollar investment by NRF, brings top researchers from some of the world's best universities to work in Singapore alongside Singapore collaborators. Crossing disciplines and institutions, this no-walls integrated research community promises to create unprecedented breakthroughs.

The pioneer initiative of CREATE is the Singapore-MIT Alliance for Research and Technology Centre, SMART for short. SMART will be located in our University Town@Warren – a mere stone's throw from where we are now. Senior MIT faculty members will work with Singapore collaborators in several areas, the first of which is infectious diseases.

SMART/CREATE had other suitors. How did we get this prized catch? One factor is our 6000-strong residential global community of undergraduate and graduate students at University Town@Warren. SMART/CREATE understands the synergy

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<sup>1</sup> More information is available at the NRF website at <http://www.nrf.gov.sg>

<sup>2</sup> Research grant of US\$1.5 million on top of annual salary ranging between US\$50K and \$100K.

of research with education in an integrated learning and living environment. Having SMART/CREATE here at NUS is a tide that invigorates. Had it gone elsewhere, it would have eroded our education and research edge.

A tide is upon us. It is rising. Let us be energized by our unrelenting pursuit of excellence. Excellence in research, excellence in education and excellence in service.

### **The Unrelenting Pursuit of Excellence: G-10-10**

Excellence has its markers. The unrelenting pursuit of excellence for this University calls for a push towards G-10-10 – 10 great programs or departments in 10 years.

I see G-10-10 as a collective compact for global excellence. And in this, the University will be your partner. The University continues to be ready to commit resources and work with you.

G-10-10 calls for teams of people with shared interests and shared passion to complement one another and work together. Heads, Deans and Management have vital roles in creating a supportive and nurturing environment where the aspirations, strengths and efforts of individuals synergize and multiply.

Whatever the size or standing of your program or department, I call on you to get engaged and ask yourself: “What will it take to make my program stand among the world’s best?” Offer your vision. Make your case. Present your strategy.

The process of identifying areas and developing programs for G-10-10 will be competitive and collaborative, open and rigorous. We will also be seeking the advice of external experts. The buzz created by each program striving towards greatness will energize our University.

I’m also setting aside time in the coming months for visits and discussions with faculty members. These could be opportunities for me to hear you and for us to exchange ideas, including G-10-10.

### **Essentials of Excellence: Be, Help, Get**

To rise to G-10-10, I believe there are three essentials.

First, be our best. Second, help others be their best. Third, get the best.

#### *Be Our Best*

Point 1. Be our best.

Each one of us striving to be our best. This evening, we honor and celebrate 12 members of our community for being their best in the areas of education, research, and service.

Pao Chuen, Swee Hock, Gungwu, Soh Ha, Kheng Lian, Xiang Yang, Ping, Ishtiaq, Alirio, Yu Hao, Sunita and Victor:

On behalf of this University, let me express our sincere appreciation for using your talents to excel – your love to confront the unknown, which is at the heart of research; your passion to touch the minds and hearts of students; and your will to make a difference through service. Thank you. Thank you.

### Help Others Be Their Best

Point 2. Help others be their best.

Take for example, the Tour de France – a grueling three-week road race over several thousand kilometers. Only the best teams are invited to race.

The front riders of the team give their all to battle wind resistance. They create a shield for teammates riding behind them. Eventually, tired out, they fall back, enabling fresher teammates to come from behind and surge ahead to cross the finish line and win the race. While some bask in the glory, all share in the victory.

Within NUS, we also have people helping others be their best. Enlightened department Heads and senior faculty are opening doors for the younger ones, mentoring them, and creating a supportive environment for the unrelenting pursuit of excellence. Some Heads are giving lighter teaching loads to new and young faculty, enabling them to focus on research in their early years. A department's rise in stature raises everyone's standing too.

### Get The Best

Point 3. Get the best.

Get the best so you can be your best. Get the best so you can experience the joy of being with the best.

SMART's location at NUS means that some of the best researchers are coming here, and we have the opportunity to learn and to run with them. We can be part of the intellectual energy and excitement.

An intent of tenure is to create job security and promote confidence. Security and confidence empower us to recruit the best, even those better than us – people who have the potential to surpass our own achievements, people who will energize the intellectual life of our community.

Let me offer an example. In 1988, John Sexton became Dean of the Law School at New York University. NYU Law was then an average school. In about a decade, it rose to the top tier. *The New York Times* described Sexton as having “engineered the most stunning climb to the top in the recent history of American legal education”<sup>3</sup>. How did he do it? Through relentless recruitment. He spent long hours in one-on-one sessions with faculty being considered for hire.

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<sup>3</sup> The New York Times article “Ivy Envy” is available on the NYU website at <http://w4.stern.nyu.edu/news/news/2003/june/0608nyt2.html>.

When he became NYU president, Sexton's opening shot for global excellence was Economics. Sexton challenged the department to pursue the very best. His prized catch was Stanford's Thomas Sargent – the best-known living economist that non-economists have never heard of.

Friends and colleagues, if you think that Sexton was coy in courting Sargent, you can't be more wrong. *The New York Times* describes academic wooing as making other forms of romance simple in comparison. Had it been a romantic courtship, Sexton would have been labeled a stalker. He pursued, he wined and dined, he refused to be spurned.

To get "A-plus" scholars to NYU, existing faculty were persuaded to set aside narrow, individual interests for a collective compact for excellence. Sexton made it clear that if there were any complaints of inequity or demands for similar packages, "the deal was off". With this compact for excellence, the economics department helped NYU to ride the tide into the upper ranks of North American universities.

Let me give an example closer to home. Giving their best, our senior academics including Professors Lai Choy Heng, Oh Choo Hiap, and Tan Eng Chye, threw their weight behind recruiting Artur Ekert, world-renowned co-inventor of quantum cryptography. Artur's appointment was a boost to the young quantum group in our Physics department.

Later, when the NRF invited proposals for Research Centres of Excellence (RCE), the quantum group<sup>4</sup> was quick to seize the opportunity. Their collective efforts led to the winning of more than \$150 million in funds for the first and only RCE to receive the endorsement of the NRF's scientific advisory board. We look forward to our quantum RCE accomplishing great science and, we hope, delivering a G-10-10 along the way.

## Closing

Colleagues, a tide is upon us. It is rising. Will it invigorate us? Or, will it engulf us? Will we make G-10-10 a reality? You hold the answer. You must choose.

Our University has contributed to the successful transformation of Singapore from third world to first<sup>5</sup>. As Singapore continues its transformation towards a knowledge economy and first world society, NUS has a vital, if not pre-eminent, role to play.

A tide is upon all of us. To be invigorated, the challenge is to **be our best, help others be their best, and get the best.**

Thank you.

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<sup>4</sup> More information on the work and development of the quantum group may be found at <http://www.quantumlah.org/aboutus>

<sup>5</sup> *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965 - 2000* is a book of memoirs by Singapore's first Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.