

**SPEECH BY PROFESSOR TAN ENG CHYE,
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE
AT THE SPECIAL CONFERMENT CEREMONY
FOR THE HONORARY DOCTOR OF LETTERS
ON TUESDAY, 12 JANUARY 2021, 11.00 AM AT NUS**

Madam Halimah Yacob, President of the Republic of Singapore and NUS Chancellor

NUS Pro-Chancellors

NUS Chairman

Distinguished Honorary Graduand

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Over the course of a long and remarkable life and career, Dr Oon Chiew Seng has taken on many diverse and challenging roles. She has been variously, a pioneering medical practitioner, a social activist, a community leader and a philanthropist.
2. In each of these roles, she brought her trademark forthrightness, determination, and generous spirit of compassion. Through her endeavours, Dr Oon has created immense social impact, and her work and dedication have benefitted a broad spectrum of Singapore society. She is an inspiration and a role model, not only for her dedicated community service, but also in her refreshingly zestful approach to living a full, rich and engaged life.
3. 2021 has just begun, but 2020 will long live in our collective memory for its unprecedented upheavals, due to the global impact of COVID-19. In this difficult environment, I believe that graduates, present and future, will do well to emulate and develop a few key attributes that have defined Dr Oon's life and deeds.
4. The first is tackling challenges full on, with courage, determination and commitment. Whether setting up Singapore's first private genealogical practice, or establishing the nation's first dedicated dementia care facility, Dr Oon did not flinch from difficult circumstances or setbacks, but instead pressed on, with firm resolve, and bold action.

5. The NUS community did not escape the impact of COVID-19, though we were fortunate to escape its worst possible effects. NUS' annual Commencement ceremonies were however, disrupted, due to the pandemic. This was a disappointment to many of our graduating cohort, and their families. On a broader front, jobs were lost, careers disrupted, and our most recent graduates had to contend with a more challenging employment market, and rapidly changing work environments.
6. Given the deep uncertainties surrounding us, the examples of luminaries such as Dr Oon remind us that the spirit of resilience and fortitude is absolutely essential, if we are to overcome difficulties, and chart new paths forward to a strong and more hopeful future.
7. A second admirable attribute lies in Dr Oon's dedication to serve society, and those in need. She has shown that when we rally together, we can support each other through difficult times.
8. This sense of solidarity and service to community is deeply embedded in NUS' ethos. For example, during the height of COVID-19, the NUS community was galvanised, and we were able to launch, within a short time frame, the NUS Resilience and Growth Initiative, which is a comprehensive suite of services spanning financial aid, employment, innovation and lifelong learning opportunities to help future-proof our students and graduates.
9. A final admirable attribute of Dr Oon has been her generosity in giving back. This can take many forms, and for Dr Oon, this has encompassed developing into a philanthropist of foresight and vision, and a strong supporter of science, research and education.
10. In 2011, Dr Oon established the Oon Chiew Seng Fellowship in Medicine which was subsequently converted to the Oon Chiew Seng Professorship in Medicine. In the same year, Dr Oon also made a contribution to allow the University to start the Oon Chiew Seng Distinguished Visitor Programme which brought leading

academics to NUS. This included Professor John O’Keefe, who won the Nobel Prize a year after his visit to NUS as the Oon Distinguished Visitor. Collectively, these programmes have, and will continue to contribute to NUS and Singapore as we advance our understanding and treatment of brain diseases and dementia-related fields.

11. In 2020, NUS celebrated its 115th anniversary. By any reasonable expectation, the pandemic should have significantly diminished our sense of celebration and pride. However, we chose instead to take inspiration from trailblazers such as Dr Oon, and turned the disruptions caused by COVID-19 into opportunity by boldly mapping out new directions for the University. One recent announcement was the College of Humanities and Sciences, which will help our students prepare for an ever more complex world by integrating inter-disciplinary learning, and development of a greater range of competencies across disciplines.
12. Over the course of her life, Dr Oon has been justly recognised with many honours and awards, both globally and nationally. On our part, the National University of Singapore is proud of Dr Oon Chiew Seng’s lifetime of remarkable achievements, and tireless service to the community. She is one of our most distinguished alumna, and we are truly honoured to have the opportunity to confer upon her the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.
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