

**Welcome Address by NUS President Prof Tan Eng Chye
at the Singaporean Researchers Global Summit
6 August 2019, 8.30 am
Shaw Foundation Alumni House**

Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Finance and Chairman of National Research Foundation, Mr Heng Swee Keat

Distinguished Guests

Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen

Welcome to the inaugural Singaporean Researchers Global Summit. For those of you who are currently based overseas, a warm welcome home, and to the NUS campus. NUS is delighted to host this special gathering, which brings together Singaporean researchers and aspiring academics based in Singapore and around the world. Within academic circles, we attend many discipline-based conferences. It is a rare opportunity to have a congregation of Singaporeans, vested in research and academia, spanning a wide range of disciplines, under one roof. On this occasion, we will get to share experiences, perspectives, and discuss the research landscape, directions and opportunities in Singapore.

The American film *Crazy Rich Asians* portrays Singapore as a clean and green city, with good food and great views of Marina Bay Sands. Certainly, this is all true. But Singapore is much more than that. We have built a deep, resilient economy and society, with considerable strengths as a hub for logistics, transport, finance, IT and many other knowledge-based sectors. The higher education sector has also grown in breadth, depth and strength, to drive and support Singapore's growth. There are now six Autonomous Universities (or AUs); it is a diverse, yet cohesive and comprehensive research landscape in Singapore, comprising universities, research institutes, research centres of excellence, corporate laboratories, private sector R&D, and more.

Autonomous universities receive strong Government support in terms of resourcing, yet with the flexibility and nimbleness to pursue initiatives and programmes in line with their mission and vision. Singapore institutions have moved quickly to raise quality dramatically, and to pursue world-class excellence. Today, Singapore counts two large and comprehensive universities; they are Asia's top universities and they have built a strong international reputation. This is an impressive feat for a small country of three and a half million citizens.

As Singapore's flagship university, NUS takes a strong interest in nurturing the next generation of Singaporean academic talent, helping them to realize their academic aspirations. I am glad to see that there are young ambitious Singaporeans who are keen to pursue the path of academia.

(Unfortunately, if you are looking towards *Crazy Rich Asians* type of wealth and lifestyle, this may not be the right career for you.) But to me, an academic career is an immensely fulfilling one. As researchers, we have the freedom to pursue our curiosities, determine our research agenda, and often times, lead a team to pursue the questions that we are interested in investigating. We spend our time reading, thinking, conducting experiments, testing hypothesis, and our work contributes to advancing knowledge frontiers. Research also allows us to take a deep and long term approach to solving problems. We also get to teach, engage and mentor students, which for many of us, is a most rewarding part of an academic career.

It is however difficult for the world outside of academia, to understand how daunting and difficult it is to succeed as an academic. As a mathematician, had I known what the odds and payoffs are, I'm not sure if I would have taken the same path. The competition is global and highly intense; you're up against the best and brightest minds in the world. A PhD is but the first step; it is a long and arduous journey, with many uncertainties and personal sacrifices. The nature of research is such that things may not always go according to plan. Getting a top university tenure-track position requires more than passion, intelligence and grit. You will also have to actively seek opportunities, mentorship and networks to inform and sharpen your research directions. After producing ground-breaking work, you then need to get out there and get known.

NUS is acutely aware of this highly competitive global academic environment, and we want to help aspiring Singaporean academics to succeed in your careers. This is why NUS has launched a Development Grant, which provides funding support to help you augment your research work, and to build up an early publication record and competitive portfolio. The Development Grant is tenable for a year, and does not come with any service obligation. PhD students will be awarded up to \$10,000 a year, and postdoctoral fellows, up to \$20,000. We welcome Singaporeans who are pursuing your PhDs or postdoctoral fellows to apply for the grant. Even if you are not with NUS at this point, we would like to reach out to you, support you, as you endeavour to carve a niche and establish yourself in academia.

The NUS Development Grant complements the range of schemes that the Ministry of Education and the Autonomous Universities have put in place, to groom and attract the next generation of Singaporean academics; not only are they thought leaders in their disciplines, they will also be the future leaders of Singapore universities. Minister Ong Ye Kung will speak more about the various national schemes this evening.

My second point today is to convey to researchers and academics that this is a very exciting time to be in Asia, arguably the world's most dynamic and fastest growing region. In one of his previous speeches, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat has said that for the first time, the industrial revolution is not just happening to Asia, it is occurring right here in Asia, with many Asian companies being among the most innovative and best regarded businesses in the world. Previously, during the dot-com era, we would look on and marvel in amazement, from a distance, at technology giants like eBay, Amazon and Google

bursting into the scenes, and for their products and services to be rolled out from the US, to the rest of the world. But today, there is innovation right here in Asia (take Grab or Tencent for example); Asia is also home to industries, markets and consumers. As an academic or researcher in Singapore, there are many interesting opportunities, to conduct research, access talents, funding opportunities and markets, and for your research to create regional impact.

There are so many innovations that can come forth from research activities. I would like to encourage all Singaporean researchers present here today, who are keen to explore how you can augment your ideas and research impact, to connect with the AUs, and with the research, innovation and enterprise ecosystem in Singapore. There have been many developments in recent years – NUS for example, has made inroads in establishing research collaborations and BLOCK71 incubators in the region; they allow for our researchers and start-ups to access markets, talents and opportunities, and to bring your research innovations to the region.

Research impact and commercialisation are not confined to STEM disciplines. The Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences tackle important and pressing issues in society and economy, from population trends, to education, the relationships between peoples and nations, the management of our economy, the implications of new technologies, and more. NUS works closely with government agencies, international organisations, NGOs and with many social sector players; our academic research informs and shapes public policy, enriches society and raises the quality of life.

Ladies and gentlemen, having spoken about the Development Grant and research impact, it leaves me now to return to my original task, which is to deliver a welcome address. Whether you are a senior academic, or in the midst of your PhD studies, I hope that you will find the Summit useful. It is a great opportunity for you to be apprised and acquainted with the key research developments in Singapore, and to connect with academic and industry leaders. I must thank Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat for hosting the dialogue session, as well as all the speakers, panellists, returning Singaporeans and mentors who have stepped forward to speak at this Summit. I am sure we will benefit from your insights and experiences. I also hope that the senior academics among us here today, will generously extend your advice and mentorship to the younger ones. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Prof Ho Teck Hua, Senior Deputy President and Provost of NUS, and his team, for their good work in planning and putting this Summit together. On this note, I wish everyone here a fruitful and enjoyable Summit.

Thank you.