SPEECH BY MR GOH CHOK TONG, SENIOR MINISTER, AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE CENTENNIAL DINNER, 2 JULY 2005, 8.00 PM AT SUNTEC CITY BALLROOM

Fellow alumni
Distinguished guests
Ladies and gentlemen

My wife and I are delighted to join you for this evening’s celebrations. I am deeply honoured to be conferred the inaugural National University of Singapore (NUS) Eminent Alumni Award.

May I offer my warmest congratulations to NUS for crossing this centennial milestone. It is a landmark occasion to celebrate the University’s achievements and reflect on its future. I also congratulate the NUS Centennial Expedition team for reaching the summit of Mount Everest on 31 May. Its success reflects the peak of excellence which NUS is capable of achieving.

NUS is much older than Singapore’s existence as a sovereign nation. This paradoxical situation has arisen because NUS can trace its lineage to the Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Government Medical School which was established in 1905. The evolution of this Medical School into NUS has closely mirrored the history and aspirations of Singapore – from colony to self-government, from merger to separation, and finally, independence on our own. In fact, the history and destinies of both NUS and Singapore are intertwined.

The Straits Settlements and Federated Malay States Government Medical School was renamed King Edward VII Medical School in 1913 and then King Edward VII College of Medicine in 1921. In 1928, Raffles College was set up. Eminent alumni of both colleges include Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, Howe Yoon Chong, Maurice Baker, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the late Abdul Razak, Malaysia’s second Prime Minister, and the late Dr Ismail bin Dato Abdul Rahman, Razak’s Deputy Prime Minister. In 1949, King Edward College and Raffles College merged to form the University of Malaya. Malaya did not then have its own university and many Malayan students studied in Singapore.
I entered the University of Malaya in 1961. Places were then limited. At that time, only 3 percent of each cohort made it to university, compared to more than 20 percent today. In the Sixties, many families could not afford to send their children to university, leave alone sending them overseas. There were hardly any overseas scholarships.

Half way through my first year, in January 1962, the University changed its name to the University of Singapore, or SU as it was commonly referred to. This followed the decision of the governments of Singapore and Malaya to have autonomous universities in their respective countries. The University of Malaya had two campuses then, one in Singapore and the other in Kuala Lumpur. The KL campus was established in 1959, two years after Malaya gained independence. The desire of Malaya to have its own university was understandable. But this change deprived future leaders of both countries the opportunity to forge personal friendships as fellow undergraduates.

The three years I spent in university were tumultuous ones for Singapore. The PAP Government was locked in a mortal struggle with the communists over the future of the country. The PAP sought independence through merger with Malaysia. The communists and their supporters were against merger because it meant independence for Singapore. This would pull the rug from under their feet as they could no longer fight the PAP Government under the guise of being anti-colonialists. All over the island, the communists agitated the workers and organised strikes.

However, SU students were not caught up with these political events, unlike students in Nantah. Most of them were apolitical. Many students came from low-income families and treasured the opportunity to study. Many, like me, were the first in our families to enter university. In addition, through the requirement of Suitability Certificates, the Government had screened out potential trouble-makers and agitators. We were cloistered in our ivory tower while political fires were burning around us.

However, members of the Socialist Club were the exception. They were interested in political affairs. Some leaders of the Club were supporters of the Barisan Sosialis. A few of them stood as candidates for Barisan Sosialis in the 1963 General Elections upon their graduation. Some were later detained under the Internal Security Act. I was invited to join the Socialist Club. I declined, not being of a socialist bent and preferring to concentrate on my studies.

However, I was active in the Economics Society. I became its President in my final year and edited its journal called Suara Ekonomi.

In 16 September 1963, when I was in my final year, Singapore
gained independence through merger with Malaysia. I joined the gathering of students in the quadrangle at the Bukit Timah campus to watch the Malaysian flag being raised. We struggled to sing *Negaraku*, our new national anthem. It was a muted rather than a great celebratory occasion.

12 Five days after the inauguration of Malaysia, Singapore went to the polls. The results would decide whether the communists or the PAP would control Singapore as a member state of Malaysia. I voted for the first time, in Pasir Panjang ward. I cast my vote for Othman Wok because it was clear to me that the PAP offered the better future for Singapore.

13 However, the merger was short-lived. Singaporeans soon discovered that the PAP’s vision of a “Malaysian Malaysia” was at odds with UMNO’s vision of a Malay-dominated Malaysia. Trouble started brewing and communal tensions ran high. This culminated in racial riots in July 1964, the same month that I started work in City Hall. On 9th August 1965, after less than 23 months in Malaysia, Singapore separated to become an independent and sovereign nation.

14 Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore tackled grave economic, social and security challenges amidst a difficult external environment. The Government invested heavily in education and SU evolved to meet the needs of the nation. To solve the problem of declining academic standards in Nantah, SU and Nantah began to operate a joint campus in 1978. They were formally merged on 8 August 1980 to form the National University of Singapore.

15 Thus, although the name NUS is only 25 years old, the University has an eventful history of 100 years. Over its long history, NUS has produced Prime Ministers, Ministers, senior civil servants, corporate leaders and top professionals in both Singapore and Malaysia. Not just that. NUS has also established a high international reputation. In the 2004 “Top 200 World University Ranking” by The Times Higher Education Supplement, NUS emerged 18th. This is something we should all be proud of.

16 Looking ahead, what does the future hold for NUS?

17 The world of the future will be very different from the one I knew as an undergraduate and even more so when we compare it with a century ago. 1905 was the year Albert Einstein published his paper on the special theory of relativity; two years before that, Orville Wright made his 12-second airborne flight. Today, the world is open and interconnected in ways which few of us could have imagined. You can now fly from Singapore to New York non-stop in 18 hours.

http://app.sprinter.gov.sg/data/pr/20050702995.htm
For NUS to become a top-notch university in such a relentlessly changing and globalised world, it must tackle three key intertwining challenges: first, go global; second, attract top talent; and third, be competitive. These are also some of the key challenges which we, as a country, have to tackle to stay ahead and succeed.

First, going global. University education has become truly globalised. It is not enough to be the best in one’s own backyard. When students decide on which courses to take, they scour the world to check out the best universities and programmes. NUS must therefore strive to improve its standing and performance globally and benchmark itself against the best universities around the world. NUS must aspire to be among the top, not just in the region, but the world.

I am told that NUS has been strengthening its international collaboration as part of its strategy to go global. Currently, NUS has about 200 agreements with almost 150 overseas institutions in countries stretching from Asia to America. This is a good development but more could be done, especially with top universities in China and India. NUS should also explore more ways to strengthen links with the University of Malaya to create bonds between the students from both institutions.

Second, NUS must draw top talent - students and faculty.

A top class university must at the very least attract the best brains from its home country. In the Sixties, the student population of SU was around 2,400. Today, NUS has a population of around 31,000, 13 times more. However, unlike in the Sixties, each year, most of today’s top 1 percent of each cohort go overseas for studies, either on government scholarships or on their own. The exceptions are Medicine, and to some extent, Law. NUS must solve the conundrum of how to attract the top 1 percent of Singapore students.

The ability of NUS to do so has implications beyond its academic standing. I am a product of the local university. I proud of it. I believe that instinctively, my bond with NUS is stronger than those who have not studied in Singapore. And speaking as an alumnus, it is my hope that NUS would produce other Singapore Prime Ministers in the future. It is also important for our local universities to play a part in nurturing our future leaders in the civil service and private sector.

In addition, NUS must attract good students from all over the world, particularly from the region. They will boost the intellectual and learning environment. NUS must also attract top professors as good faculty will attract good students and produce world class research. This is a virtuous cycle which will improve the overall quality and reputation of the University.
Third, for NUS to be competitive internationally, it must find ways to enhance its attraction. Today, Singaporeans are internationally mobile. They have high expectations and many options. Parents no longer need to rely on government scholarships to send their children overseas. To be attractive, NUS must be able to provide students with the best of both worlds – an enriched local experience combined with global exposure. NUS would also need to shrug off its unfair image as simply being a less costly alternative to an overseas university education.

The Government will continue to send some of our best students to top universities abroad. The overseas experience helps to broaden their minds and allows them to network with the best and brightest in the US, Europe, China and India. But I encourage NUS to explore with the Public Service Commission and other scholarship awarding organisations ways to attract more of our top students to study locally.

I am glad to learn that NUS has initiated several creative programmes to strengthen its competitiveness and enhance its attraction. It has established a broad-based multi-disciplinary programme called the University Scholars Programme (USP). USP students read for an NUS degree but spend a significant part of their time participating in specialised overseas programmes and tie-ups which include internships and community projects. Some will also spend a year or two in double or joint degree programmes and bicultural programmes in overseas universities.

NUS already offers internship opportunities in start-ups located in leading entrepreneurial and academic hubs in the world like Silicon Valley, Bio-Valley, Shanghai and Stockholm. NUS should also leverage more on its competitive advantage of being one of the most reputable Asian universities offering a superb English-based education.

NUS is moving in the right direction and has made significant progress in tackling the three key challenges critical to its future. But NUS cannot afford to rest on its laurels. All around us, the competition is intensifying. NUS must strive to scale more academic peaks of excellence.

Let me conclude. This evening’s dinner is a happy reunion that brings together the entire NUS family of staff, students, alumni, partners and friends. I wish NUS continued academic excellence in the next phase of its evolution.

Thank you.