President of NTU, Dr Su Guaning,
NTU Council Members
Distinguished Alumni
Friends and Fellow Singaporeans

1 Thank you for inviting me to your Alumni Night and to celebrate the NTU’s 50th anniversary. Time really flies. I was here 10 years ago to celebrate your 40th anniversary with the global Nantah alumni.

2 I was not associated with Nantah but I had a hand in NTU’s conception. In 1979, as Minister for Trade and Industry, I chaired the Council on Professional and Technical Education or CPTE. The Council was charged with developing strategic plans to meet the future manpower needs of our economy. Other Council members included Dr Tony Tan, who was then Senior Minister of State for Education, Lim Chee Onn, then Secretary-General of the NTUC and Dr Ahmad Mattar, then Minister in charge of Industrial Training.

3 One of CPTE’s key recommendations was to set up an Institute of Technology to train a pool of skilled and technical manpower to meet our economic needs. Following Cabinet approval, a bill was tabled in Parliament in June 1981. Two months later, the Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI) was born. Its mission was to produce practice-oriented engineers for the burgeoning Singapore economy. It was decided right at the start that NTI would be converted into a full-fledged university after it has gained its footing.
4 CPTE had a hilarious time deciding on the name of this new Institute. We wanted to retain the name “Nanyang” as the Institute would rise from the campus of the old Nanyang University. We also wanted the word “technology” to reflect the mission of the Institute. An obvious name was “Nanyang Institute of Technology”. It had resonance like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. But unlike MIT, a NIT graduate would be regarded as a fool. And when NIT became the “Nanyang University of Technology”, its graduates would be NUTs. Then someone suggested “Technological Institute of Nanyang”. “TIN” did not sound too bad but “TUN” for “Technological University of Nanyang” did not seem right. We did not establish the University to produce “TUNs”. Besides, in Hokkien, “TUN” meant dense which brought us back to square one – NIT. After playing with other permutations, we eventually settled for the name “Nanyang Technological Institute”. It was rather a mouthful but at least nobody could make fun of the acronym “NTI”.

5 In 1991, NTI absorbed the National Institute of Education and became the Nanyang Technological University. As Prime Minister, I officially opened NTU in June that year. Here I would like to pay a tribute to two people who played a major part in building up NTI and NTU: Michael Fam, Chairman of the NTI Council from 1981 to 1993 and Cham Tao Soon, President of NTI, and later NTU, from 1981 to 2002.

NTU’s Achievements

6 NTU has come quite far. In the 2005 “Top World University Ranking” by The Times Higher Education Supplement, NTU emerged 48th. Within Asia, only eight other universities ranked ahead of NTU. In the same survey, NTU ranked 26th among technology universities worldwide. You have much to be proud of.

7 NTU graduates have also done well. Many have gone on to play significant roles in the political, social, cultural and economic life of Singapore, and internationally. What is interesting is the diversity of your graduates and the fields they are engaged in. The University gave me a long list of distinguished alumni. Some of them will be honoured this evening with the Nanyang Alumni Awards.

Thriving in a Globalised World
Going forward, what will the future hold for NTU?

The world will become more globalised. That is fact number 1. Fact 2: change will take place at an accelerating pace. Fact 3: some of these changes will be bold and unprecedented. Just look at what is happening in East Asia. An East Asia Free Trade Area was unthinkable a decade ago. But now it is no longer a pipe dream.

This has profound implications on the global university landscape. Higher education will be internationalised. Competition for faculty members and students will be even more intense. As China and India emerge as economic giants, their universities will get better. They will also have an impact on our university sector.

In such an open and rapidly-changing world, universities must adapt, perform or decline. Those which cannot move or adapt fast enough will drop off the table of rankings. You know what Charles Darwin wrote in the *Origin of Species*:

“It is not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change”.

“Survival of the fittest” does not mean that the race will go to the swift or strong. The species that do not go extinct are those that best adapt and fit into their environment.

NTU will continue to thrive only if it can anticipate and adapt to the demands of the new world ahead. I see three areas in which this new world will impact on our universities, including NTU.

First, the success of universities will depend on their ability to attract top talent. Cambridge, Massachusetts, is home to several great universities, including Harvard and MIT. In terms of population, the state of Massachusetts is not very large. It has around 6.4 million people. However, universities like Harvard and MIT cast their nets far and wide to catch the best faculty and students. They draw in top talent from all over the world, thus producing an ecological system that sustains the universities’ excellent performance.
To become a top university, NTU too must actively draw in talent – both local and foreign. NTU must go beyond its traditional sources to recruit faculty and students. I am told that NTU has already made some headway in attracting top international faculty, students and industry partners.

Second, universities must develop niche strengths to differentiate themselves from their competitors. To use Darwinian language again, you must create or occupy your own ecological niche. Top universities have achieved excellence not simply by replicating what others have done, but by developing and deepening their own strengths.

To distinguish itself, NTU should build on its core strengths in Engineering and Technology. NTU aspires to be in the top tier of science and technology universities worldwide and the premier Science and Engineering University in Asia. This is a worthwhile target to aim for.

Environment technology is one example of NTU enhancing a traditional strength. Over the years, NTU has undertaken initiatives to support this field, including a unique joint post-graduate programme with Stanford University. Recently, one of the research institutes in Environmental Science and Engineering has spun off into a new corporate entity. The company will provide value-added research and commercialisation services in environmental technology for the industry.

NTU has also decided to focus on Research and Development (R&D) and seeks to become a world-class research university. The University’s close ties with industry will give it an advantage in industry-relevant R&D. R&D is a strategic resource we must develop. NTU will take on an increasingly important role in the national research agenda.

In this connection, I believe that NTU can play an important role in remaking Singapore’s economy. In the past, our economy was driven mainly by efficiency, cost effectiveness and MNCs. The chief role of our universities and polytechnics was to produce technical, professional and managerial manpower for the economy. In the future, knowledge creation, innovation, entrepreneurial drive and risk taking are the critical success factors.
Third, universities must provide students with an education that will equip them for the challenges and opportunities of a borderless, knowledge-based world. They must train students beyond their professional disciplines and broaden their knowledge to understand global issues and trends. Today, many companies post young graduates abroad to manage their overseas sales and operations. Our students should be prepared for this, with language and social skills, and with knowledge of the culture and business practices of other countries.

I am told that NTU is enhancing the training given to students by making the curriculum not only rigorous but broad-based and flexible. There are now more than 20 minors and 100 general electives for students to choose from. NTU has also expanded the scale and coverage of its Global Immersion Programme. This will give students more options and opportunities to work and study abroad. NTU students also gain overseas experience through its student exchange and overseas work attachment programmes with some 250 partners across 40 countries such as China, India and the United States. This will cultivate a global mindset in them.

The Role of Alumni

Let me now turn to the role that alumni can play in the growth of NTU.

Last month, Parliament passed the NTU Corporatisation Act. This is an important development in our review and rethink of higher education and the university sector. Corporatisation will give our universities greater flexibility to face up to new challenges.

The transformation from a public to an autonomous university will take time. There needs to be a change of culture to produce the intellectual climate and buzz so that faculty, students and management can spur each other to produce top quality research and teaching. It will test the entrepreneurial spirit in our universities.

With autonomy, NTU will have greater latitude to chart its own strategic directions and take the necessary strides towards excellence. This will improve the chances of NTU becoming a world class university. It is a new and exciting phase.
26 Corporatisation sends a strong signal that the University belongs to its stakeholders, not the Government. With autonomy, the stakeholders of NTU - the Trustees, management, faculty, students and of course, the alumni – must assume responsibility in charting the University’s strategic directions and participate actively in its development and growth. They must have a sense of ownership and the passion to make NTU better.

27 As alumni, you have much to contribute, whether through donations to the university endowment fund or by serving in university committees, providing work attachment opportunities to students, or participating in university activities and initiatives. I am told that alumni are helping to provide industrial attachments and career opportunities for students. From start-ups to MNCs, in diverse areas like engineering, business and communications, alumni are engaging and sharing with students their first-hand experience. Many NTU alumni are working in China and have assisted in finding industrial attachment placements for students. I am happy to hear this.

28 Today, NTU has a total of 97,000 alumni and 20 alumni associations. You have the bulk and brains to make a difference to your alma mater. Alumni can and must help NTU to realize its vision to be a global university of excellence.

Conclusion

29 Let me conclude. Alumni carry the name of the university long after they have graduated. That was why CPTE was mindful of the acronym for your University’s name. Alumni like you enhance NTU’s reputation. In turn, the current and future reputation of the University burnishes the shine of your degrees. It is a symbiotic relationship. You have a vested interest to ensure that the reputation of NTU goes up, not down.

30 Many of you here this evening remember fondly your days at Nantah, NTI or NTU. That is why you have gathered here - to meet your friends, talk about the old times and relive your youth, remembering the fun and excitement of days gone by. This evening’s reunion is a strong statement of your attachment to your alma mater. NTU gave you a solid foundation in life. Help it to scale new peaks of excellence.
I wish all of you an enjoyable and memorable evening. Thank you.