Speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the NTU 50th Anniversary Celebration, 29 August 2005, 7 PM, at NTU

Mr Koh Boon Hwee, Chairman, NTU Council,

Dr Su Guaning, President, NTU,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen

INTRODUCTION

Let me extend my warmest congratulations to the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) on your 50th anniversary. This is indeed a historic milestone for NTU, and we have every reason to rejoice.

THE SPIRIT OF NANTAH

Nanyang University (Nantah) was founded in 1955 through the generous contributions of the Chinese community. The Hokkien Huay Kuan donated the 200-hectare Yunnan Garden campus which NTU still occupies today. The Nantah enterprise was backed by generous and public-spirited community leaders and philanthropists, including prominent founders like Mr Tan Lark Sye and Mr Lee Kong Chian. It was also supported by the entire Chinese community in Singapore. From merchants to trishaw riders, everyone contributed according to their means. There was a tremendous sense of ownership and pride, as people from all walks of life raised funds together to build a Chinese language university, the only one in Southeast Asia.

The early Nantah students were keenly aware that they had benefited from the generosity of the society. They knew that had Nantah not been set up, most of them would have had no opportunity to pursue university education. They were grateful and wanted to live up to expectations of the community. Many saw themselves as Chinese intellectuals, whose tradition included a strong sense of mission to contribute to and better the society. They followed closely what happened outside of university and became actively involved in the process and politics of building our young nation.
Unfortunately, the tide of history was against Nantah. Even before 1959, the number of students enrolled in Chinese schools was falling. More and more parents were sending their children to English schools, and eventually their numbers surpassed those going to Chinese schools. Nantah's source of students dried up, and standards fell. Eventually, Nantah had to be restructured. For a time there was a joint campus with the University of Singapore, after which in 1981 Nantah became the Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI), with the mission of providing quality practice-oriented engineering education. Then in 1991 NTI absorbed the National Institute of Education, and became the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Today, NTU has grown into a first-class university, among the best in Asia.

After Nantah merged with the University of Singapore, its graduates continued to give of their best. They worked to overcome their disadvantage in English, and quietly served our country and society. They put community before self, not forgetting what they had been taught. And the new students followed the example of their elders. They too engaged in community and public service, contributing their energies and talents to society. In their own careers they proved their worth, chalking up achievements year by year. Over half a century, nearly 100,000 students have graduated from the university – 11,000 from the old Nanyang University, 6,000 from NTI, and 80,000 from NTU. They have established the reputation of their alma mater in Singapore and abroad.

The founding and transformation of this university over the last 50 years reflects the spirit of Nantah – the commitment to a vision, the drive to mobilise the community, and the will to succeed in the face of adversity. On this 50th anniversary, NTU’s staff and students should appreciate what they have inherited here on this historic campus at Yunnan Garden. We should remember and thank all those who long ago contributed so selflessly to make Nantah a reality. Whichever side they were on at the time, they represented the finest spirits of their age, and Nantah epitomised what they were striving for.

We should also thank all the graduates of Nantah, NTI and NTU for your many contributions to our nation over the decades. This ultimately is the measure of the success of a university – whether it produces graduates who feel an obligation to society, and who in turn help a new generation to enjoy equal or greater opportunities than they themselves had.

RECAPTURING THE NANTAH SPIRIT

Now we live in a different era. Singapore, and NTU, have been transformed beyond recognition. Our focus should be on the future of the university, on how we can upgrade it and make it part of tomorrow’s Singapore. But we still need that faith that each one of us can change society for the better, that conviction that our individual contributions will make a difference. The Nantah spirit remains as relevant as ever. We should keep its flame alive, and
nurture a strong sense of community and mutual support, not just in NTU, but also in our other local universities, NUS and SMU, and indeed in our society at large.

The Government is devolving greater autonomy to NTU and NUS. This is a vital step forward. By the middle of next year, both universities will be corporatised into not-for-profit public companies limited by guarantee, just like SMU. They can then operate more autonomously. This will create more opportunities for civic participation in supporting and running them. The university community – the university leadership, faculty, staff, students and alumni – will all have a bigger part to play in shaping the direction and character of the university.

As each university sets its own course into the future, we can look forward to a more vibrant and diverse university sector in Singapore. Our three local universities – NTU, NUS and SMU – are already competing vigorously for the best faculty and students, locally and internationally. Next year, a private university, the SIM University (or UniSIM), will open its doors to working adults, providing them with degree-level education. We are attracting a few good foreign universities to establish branch campuses in Singapore, beginning with the University of New South Wales (UNSW) which will admit its first batch of undergraduates in 2007. Our polytechnics will also establish ties with reputable foreign institutions to enable students to pursue a degree-level education in specialised, practice-oriented fields. They all add to the mountain range of successes that Singaporeans can aspire toward.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR NTU

In this new eco-system of post-secondary educational institutions comprising the ITE Colleges, Polytechnics and Universities, NTU will continue to play an important role.

NTU currently has an enrolment of over 16,000 undergraduates. In a recent survey of the world's universities, it was ranked 50th globally and 7th in Asia. Like Singapore, NTU can be proud of its achievements, but it cannot afford to rest on its laurels. As we remake Singapore to keep pace with a changing world, NTU will also have to fundamentally re-examine its vision and strategies to stay relevant to the needs of the knowledge economy, and to be regarded as a premier university in Asia and globally.

NTU should carve its own niche and differentiate itself from NUS and other top universities around the world. You must develop a distinctive and sustainable edge in your educational and research programmes. You must identify the core strengths that will give you this special edge, the strengths that will constitute your brand name. Will you model yourself on Harvard or MIT? Both are outstanding institutions. But whereas Harvard is strong in all
disciplines, MIT builds its reputation on its Science and Engineering schools, even though its Humanities and Social Sciences departments are world class. On the West Coast of the US there is a similar contrast between Stanford and Caltech, and in Britain between Cambridge and Imperial College. NTU has to choose between these two models. You can aspire to be either like Harvard or MIT, but you cannot aspire to be both.

NTU’s Council, management and faculty will have to develop a clear vision and strategic plan for the future. You have already built up a strong reputation in engineering. In science and engineering, NTU can be a top university in Asia, with niches where you are equal to the best anywhere in the world. For example, in environmental engineering, NTU already has a reputation exceeding many other top universities. You should make the most of these strengths even as you build up new schools.

NTU has recently set up three new schools – the School of Physical & Mathematical Sciences, the School of Humanities & Social Sciences, and the School of Art, Design & Media. Humanities and social sciences, as well as Art, Design and Media complement the “harder” side of being “technological” and provide a different dimension and ambience to the university altogether. They will encourage cross-pollination of ideas, and ensure that your graduates receive a more rounded education, and acquire an understanding of humanities and appreciation of culture, instead of remaining narrow, technical problem solvers.

I suggest that the NTU Council and management consider inviting a panel of international experts to work with you on developing a roadmap for the future. By tapping their experience and insights, you will be able to articulate clear long term goals, and settle your thinking on how best to achieve them.

CONCLUSION

Singapore has come a long way in the last 40 years. Our people made it happen. To secure a better future for ourselves, we must continue to invest in our people, and nurture and groom our next generation. This is why the Government is committed to help NTU and the other post-secondary institutions grow and succeed.

Building a great university is a long-term endeavour that requires discipline, hard work and single-mindedness of purpose. But with the commitment and enthusiasm of your stakeholders, and with the same Nantah spirit and drive that has brought the university thus far, I am confident that NTU can continue to upgrade itself, and produce new generations of graduates who will open new paths forward for themselves and for Singapore.

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