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THE TIMES OF INDIA

TikTok CEO Chew Shou Zi asks NTU PhD graduates to 'seek out the unknown' in changing world

TOI Education | Aug 3, 2026, 01.30 PM IST



TikTok Chief Executive Officer Chew Shou Zi has urged graduating doctoral students at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU) to embrace uncertainty and use their expertise to address complex real-world challenges. Delivering the commencement address at the university's PhD conferment ceremony on August 1, Chew encouraged graduates to step beyond the boundaries of academia as rapid technological advances continue to reshape industries and societies.

Reflecting on his own academic and professional journey, Chew spoke about moving from an analogue childhood to leading one of the world's largest technology platforms in the age of artificial intelligence. He told the graduating class that their years of

research had prepared them not only to expand knowledge but also to apply it in ways that can create meaningful impact across the world.

From Singapore classrooms to leading a global technology company

During his address, Chew traced his educational journey from Yio Chu Kang to Hwa Chong Institution, followed by studies at the London School of Economics and later Harvard University. According to Singapore-based digital media platform Mothership, Chew said that each stage of his education broadened his perspective and helped shape his outlook.

Chew also recalled his early exposure to technology through a computer introduced by his father. Rather than developing software, he admitted he spent much of his time playing computer games.

Looking back on his career, he described witnessing several waves of technological transformation, from growing up in an analogue environment to beginning his professional life during the digital revolution and now leading TikTok in an AI-driven era.

"It's about taking a single idea and giving it the scale to reach millions or billions," Chew said, as quoted by Mothership, while explaining that technology extends beyond hardware and programming to unlocking human potential.

'Seek out the unknown'

A central message of Chew's speech focused on embracing uncertainty at a time when technological and societal change is accelerating.

According to Mothership, Chew described the present as "a pivotal and exciting point in history", where change is not only constant but also exponential.

Sharing the advice he would give his younger self, Chew said, as quoted by Mothership, "actively seek out the unknown."

He added: "You've just spent years earning a PhD, proving that you already know how to push the boundaries of human knowledge."

"Now, take that superpower and apply it to the messy, ambiguous problems of the real world."

Chew also reminded graduates that their research skills equip them to transform complex knowledge into solutions that improve people's lives.

"Now, starting today, this mission belongs to you. It's time for you to take the lead," he said, according to Mothership.

Community remains an important source of strength

Alongside encouraging graduates to embrace new challenges, Chew highlighted the importance of maintaining strong professional and personal networks after completing their doctoral studies.

He urged graduates to rely on the community they had built during their years at the university, saying those relationships would continue to play an important role throughout their careers.

According to Mothership, Chew told the graduating class: "Community is what sustains us, reminds us of our purpose, and reflects back to us what we are truly capable of."

The address combined reflections on education, technological change and leadership, while encouraging the new PhD graduates to use their academic training to navigate uncertainty and contribute to solving challenges beyond the classroom.