

Koh Boon Hwee to step down as Chairman of NTU Singapore after 28 years

Mr Koh Boon Hwee, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NTU Singapore), will be stepping down on 31 March 2021 after an illustrious 28 years.

He hands over the Chairmanship of the University to **Ms Goh Swee Chen, chairman of the National Arts Council, Institute of HR Professionals, and Global Compact Network Singapore**, who will helm the NTU Board of Trustees from 1 April 2021.

Mr Koh Boon Hwee's skilful stewardship of NTU

Mr Koh joined the Board of the then-NTU Council in 1991 and was appointed its Chairman on 1 July 1993, two years after NTU was inaugurated as a university following the merger of Nanyang Technological Institute (NTI) and the National Institute of Education (NIE). After NTU became an autonomous university in 2006, he was appointed the founding Chairman of the NTU Board of Trustees.

He singled out the 2006 corporatisation of the University that gave NTU its autonomous university status as one of the most significant moments.

"The corporatisation of NTU provided the latitude for the University to better drive its ambitions and growth, prioritising its needs in areas such as infrastructural development, supporting students' learning needs and recruitment of renowned faculty," he said.

The former chairman of Singtel, Singapore Airlines and DBS Bank, Mr Koh, a prominent businessman and veteran technology investor is also the chairman of Altara Partners, Rippledot Capital, Sunningdale Tech and Agilent Technologies, among others.

He has been instrumental in steering the development of NTU from its early days as a teaching university predominantly focused on training engineers to meet Singapore's manpower needs, to a world-class university in the global top rank today.

Mr Koh's visionary guidance, skilful governance, and support of the University's leadership has left its mark in every aspect of NTU's development in almost three decades, from its education and research to infrastructure and administration. Providing a stable and solid foundation for NTU, he has worked alongside five NTU chancellors, eight Singaporean education ministers and all four NTU presidents.

Expansion of NTU's academic offerings

In 1993 when Mr Koh was first appointed NTU Chairman, the University had only six schools – three engineering schools as well as in business, applied science and communication - and the National Institute of Education. Today, NTU has 15 schools in five academic colleges, more than 50 research centres, five autonomous institutes and three campuses in Jurong, Novena and One-North. Since 2001, seven new schools and a new college have also been added:

- School of Biological Sciences (2001)

- School of Humanities and Social Sciences (2004)
- School of Chemical and Biomedical Engineering (2005)
- School of Physical and Mathematical Sciences (2005)
- School of Art, Design and Media (2005)
- Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (2013)
- Asian School of the Environment (2015)
- Graduate College (2018)

Under Mr Koh's guidance, NTU moved to a **President-Provost leadership model** and hired its first Provost, Prof Bertil Andersson, in 2007 to take charge of academic quality and standards, including revamping its academic programmes and systems, and overhauling its faculty promotion and rewards system. Prof Andersson went on to become the third NTU President in 2011.

Establishing the NTU medical school was another milestone during Mr Koh's tenure.

"The idea of Singapore having another medical school was first mooted in the early 2000s but NTU was not ready then. But with Singapore's growing healthcare needs, when the issue was brought up again in 2007, NTU was ready. NTU found a strategic partner in Imperial College London and today, the first graduates of the **Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine** are already serving in the frontlines of Singapore's healthcare systems," he said.

Established with a record gift of S\$150 million from the Lee Foundation which amounted to S\$400 million after matching by the Singapore government, the school, established in 2013, has already graduated three cohorts of medical doctors.

A strong advocate of digital technologies, Mr Koh has supported NTU's adoption of the **flipped classroom model of learning**. Moving away from mass lectures, lessons have been digitised so that students can access course content online and spend their time in person with professors and classmates discussing solutions that explore their application of concepts and knowledge.

He also pushed for administrative reforms of the University to create more efficient and advanced administration systems to support NTU's growth.

"The work is not yet complete but having started on the greater adoption of digital technologies years before, it facilitated the University's move quickly into online learning, e-exams, virtual meetings and virtual events, and kept the NTU community safe during the COVID-19 pandemic," Mr Koh said.

Strengthening research capabilities

Under Mr Koh's stewardship, NTU made a **paradigm shift from being a predominantly teaching-led university to becoming a research-intensive university**, after its corporatisation. Mr Koh believes that NTU's transformation into a research university brings great strategic value to Singapore, as it has supported the nation's shift to a knowledge-based economy. Embracing the Humboldtian Model, education is integrated with research as a holistic combination at NTU.

NTU competed and won its first national Research Centre of Excellence and set up the **Earth Observatory of Singapore** in 2007, which is today recognised as a leading international research centre for geohazards with a focus on Southeast Asia. NTU followed up in 2012 with a second Research Centre of Excellence, the **Singapore Centre for Environmental Life Sciences Engineering**.

These two research centres gave NTU a strong foundation to create its Asian School of the Environment in 2015.

Leveraging various research programmes such as the National Research Foundation's CREATE and Corporate Lab schemes, NTU has grown the breadth of its research and partnered industry leaders including **Rolls-Royce, HP Inc, GlobalFoundries, BMW, Volvo Buses, Delta Electronics, Singtel and Alibaba**. Mr Koh has been involved in the establishment of various industry partnerships, such as NTU's joint research centre with **Lockheed Martin**, a global security and aerospace company headquartered in the US.

International reputation

As a result of the strong academic foundations it has laid, the University has been on an **upward trajectory in international league tables** in recent years. Since 2015, NTU has been ranked between 11th and 13th in QS World University Rankings, a leap from its 74th place in 2010. In the Times Higher Education Ranking, which uses a different methodology to QS, NTU is now ranked 47th, up from 174th place in 2010. The US News & World Report ranked NTU 38th this year, having improved 87 places from the 125th spot it achieved when this ranking began in 2014.

NTU has also kept its No. 1 spot for seven consecutive years in QS' league of the world's best young universities below 50 years old. In the inaugural Nature Index Young Universities ranking that assesses the world's top young universities by their research performance, published in 2020, NTU was placed second globally.

Campus transformation

Mr Koh has been personally involved in the implementation of the **2010 NTU Campus Master Plan** committee which saw the physical transformation of NTU. From being known by locals as a campus on the western far end of the Singapore island, it is now frequently named among the world's most beautiful campuses and a destination for international visitors.

NTU's recent architectural icons such as the **Hive, the Wave, the Arc and the School of Art, Design and Media building** were carefully designed to blend in with the natural landscape and its older buildings such as the **Chinese Heritage Centre** built in 1953, a gazetted national monument, and the **North and South Spine** buildings which were opened in 1986 and 1994 respectively.

"In land-scarce Singapore, it may be tempting to think about flattening the terrain to put up a building. But we have always carefully blended infrastructural projects into our natural environment so that we preserve rather than overwhelm it. Every plant around us has been carefully planned to keep the lush greenery," he said.

In an internal message announcing his stepping down as Chairman, Mr Koh reminds the NTU community to appreciate the heritage of the former Nanyang University, on which grounds NTU's campus is built on, and its contributions to Singapore's education journey.

In a fitting tribute to the legacy of the Nantah community, the **historical Yunnan Garden has been rejuvenated as part of the 2010 NTU Campus Master Plan**, reopening in early 2020 for the enjoyment of today's students. Its historical elements have been preserved together with the addition of new amenities such as wifi connection, board walks, outdoor fitness stations and a waterfall.

Lasting personal contribution to education

Growing NTU's philanthropy support has been close to Mr Koh's heart. Leading by example, he made a **personal gift of S\$2.5 million to NTU** in 2010. Together with the Singapore Government's dollar-for-dollar matching, the gift was used to establish a S\$5 million endowment fund in support of the University Scholars Award, which NTU later renamed the **Koh Boon Hwee Scholars Award** in recognition of his generous gift.

Mr Koh wanted the award to not only recognise outstanding graduating students, but more importantly, to honour the teachers and faculty members who made an impact in their success.

"Good teachers unknowingly leave an enduring legacy as they shape lives and make a difference to generations of students. Many of my teachers have left a lasting impression on me. Not only did they impart knowledge, but they also helped to forge a strong sense of purpose and built character," said Mr Koh, who studied at Saint Andrew's School in Singapore. He went on to receive a first class honours degree in mechanical engineering from the Imperial College of Science and Technology, University of London, and an MBA (Distinction) from the Harvard Business School.

Ms Goh Swee Chen

Ms Goh Swee Chen, the former Chairperson of Shell Companies in Singapore retired in January 2019. She joined the NTU Board of Trustees in August 2019 and also sits on the boards of CapitaLand, Singapore Airlines, SP Group Ltd. and Woodside Energy Ltd (Australia).

She graduated from Victoria University of Wellington and pursued her MBA at Chicago Booth at the University of Chicago.

Ms Goh said: "It is an honour for me to succeed Boon Hwee as the Chairman of NTU Board of Trustees. He has done an extraordinary job in stewardship and steering the development of the NTU in the last three decades, alongside the Trustees and the various NTU leadership teams.

"For many centuries, education has played a crucial role in the advancement of humankind. The confluence of challenges in the 21st century, amplified by the current Covid-19 pandemic puts even greater emphasis on the purpose of education, building

knowledge to improve lives. I am committed to work with members of the university community to further strengthen NTU's global and societal impact."

Professor Subra Suresh, NTU President said: "Boon Hwee has been at the heart of NTU's phenomenal progress through the years. We will miss his visionary leadership, sharp strategic insights and wise counsel. However, I am confident that we will continue to benefit from his passionate engagement with NTU in other ways for many more years to come.

"We are also excited to welcome Swee Chen to her new role. She has extensive global experience in diverse fields that span the business and social sectors. We look forward to her leadership as we strive to strengthen NTU's rapidly growing status as a leading university in the world to further expand its impact in Singapore, the region and around the globe."

Mr Lawrence Wong, Minister for Education, expressed the Ministry's deep appreciation for Mr Koh's contributions saying, "I thank Boon Hwee for his many years of dedicated service to NTU. As the longest-serving university Chairman for almost three decades, Boon Hwee's contributions to NTU and the university landscape have been immense.

"He has steered NTU through major milestones such as its formation in the 1990s and its transition to become an autonomous university in 2006. Under his visionary leadership, NTU has grown into a world-class institution with high standards in education.

"Boon Hwee has played a critical role in advancing NTU's research efforts by strengthening the nexus with industry players and public agencies to produce impactful and relevant research. He has also guided NTU in expanding the scope of its Continuing Education and Training programmes in support of the lifelong learning movement, to better prepare Singaporeans for the future.

"Swee Chen brings with her a wealth of professional experience, a strong passion for education and her contributions to many areas of public service. I am confident she will bring NTU to even greater heights."

Source: <https://indiaeducationdiary.in/koh-boon-hwee-to-step-down-as-chairman-of-ntu-singapore-after-28-years/>