



**Speech by Prof Lily Kong, SMU President
at SMU Academic Year Opening Ceremony 2019
Friday, 16 August 2019, at SMU Hall**

Mr Lim Chee Onn, Chancellor of SMU;
Mr Eddie Teo, Pro-Chancellor of SMU;
Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman of SMU;
Members of the Board of Trustees;
Distinguished guests;
Faculty and staff of SMU;
Students and alumni;

Good evening and welcome to the Academic Year Opening Ceremony! Some amongst you will know that, at my inaugural address as President of SMU in February this year, I had used the metaphor of a garden to bring to life my message, suggesting that what we are striving for is a vision of a thriving and diverse garden, where colleagues have different roles to play in its making. The message resonated with many colleagues who still use the metaphor today as part of conversations about their work, though I know there was at least one colleague who did roll his eyes! Regardless, I was delighted to learn that the organisers of this event found inspiration in that metaphor.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, you find yourselves tonight in the midst of a delightful garden. For tonight, the freshmen and women among you get to sit back and enjoy this garden we are in, as onlookers. But from tomorrow onwards, you take on our shared responsibility for cultivating it. SMU is a wonderful 'garden' in which to work, to study and to conduct research – but only because everyone here works hard to make it that way.

Our Chairman outlined some of the many opportunities you can look forward to during your educational journey here – inside and outside of the classroom. But that wealth of opportunities also means that you have choices to make – probably more choices, and more freedom to choose than you ever had before. As the opportunities open up before you, choose well. Do you want to plant the orchids or chrysanthemums, tend the banyan trees or trim them, sow the seeds or clear the pathways, build the garden bench or do the backbreaking work of weeding?

Learning entails that we do not always just wait for the flowers and fruits to harvest, but that we pick some aspect of gardening that is of interest to us, we undertake the research about what will thrive under which conditions, but we also dirty our hands, put on our garden boots, and, importantly, learn to work together.

For the freshmen and women among you, do know that, at SMU, you will get the opportunity to follow your interest. Pick the courses that most grab your attention, because that will sustain you for your journey. Experiment. Take up the exploratory course options in the new undergraduate curriculum introduced this year. This scheme encourages you to experiment with classes outside your major, without being unduly concerned about the impact on your cumulative GPA. It gives you the option to declare up to two of your passed letter grades to be excluded from the computation. In other words, if your seeds do not flower here, it's ok.

Your majors are like a specialised gardening skill you choose, but you will unlikely thrive in the long term by just focusing on that one skill and knowledge base. In this VUCA world, you will need to understand something of other skills and other domains of knowledge that allow the garden to fully thrive and blossom. Do a double major; understand that the breadth of the core curriculum opens up different ways of thinking about the world, and do not ask narrowly focused questions like "what has this got to do with my major?" Actually get your hands dirty in the garden. Do an internship. Maybe two.

Take an SMU-X course where you work on a project with a public, private or people sector agency. Learn to work with others with different skills, interests and work habits. Fellow gardeners will be different in these ways; so too will colleagues in the world of work. Go and see what other gardens are like all over the world, and learn what works and what doesn't. The SMU 100% global exposure opportunity awaits you.

Most importantly – don't simply opt out and do as little as you can at SMU. That would forfeit the unique transformational education that is one of the strongest reasons to come to SMU in the first place. In this garden, the more effort you put in, the more bounteous are the rewards that you will all reap. So thank you all for coming here this evening. I wish you all a very enjoyable evening and a most fruitful academic year ahead.