

**Speech by Mr Ho Kwon Ping, SMU Chairman
At the Opening Ceremony of SMU Commencement 2016
Suntec City Convention Centre
13 July 2016 (Wednesday)**

Guest of Honour, Mr Ong Ye Kung, Acting Minister for Education and Senior Minister of State for Defence;

Members of the Board of Trustees;

Members of the faculty and staff of SMU;

Graduates of the Class of 2016 together with your family and friends;

Good afternoon.

The theme for Commencement this year is *Journeys*, which for each of us represents the first steps towards a life of independence and self-discovery after that rather odd interregnum between adolescence and adulthood: the university experience.

My own personal journey of this nature was not linear: I had not one, but several journeys which occasionally met dead-ends. I attended three universities in three countries but only graduated from one, and managed to receive a hard-earned university degree after nine years.

As for many others, the famous Robert Frost poem *The Road Not Taken*, resonates with me, and particularly the last three lines:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

For many of you, perhaps the roads less travelled have taken you to community service in the slums of Nepal, or internships in the skyscrapers of Shanghai. For others, the coming-of-age journeys may have been more figurative than literal: emotional or intellectual self-discoveries.

But for ALL of you, whilst along the journey towards SMU you may have stumbled, hit dead ends, or taken a few shortcuts or long detours -- you have all arrived here today after four long years. But another journey starts as one ends: the passage towards careers; marriage, perhaps parenthood; and certainly not least of all, life as SMU alumni – who now number some 17,000 people around the world.

We will soon confer upon you and I quote, “all the accompanying rights, privileges and responsibilities” unquote, which are implied with a SMU degree.

Rights and privileges were not things our forefathers enjoyed. My great-grandfather was an impoverished immigrant from Guangdong province who started out as a self-taught carpenter in Singapore. Through sheer hard work and thrift – like your own ancestors – he became a small-time boat-builder of *tong-kangs*, or wooden boats. My grandfather then continued the tradition in colonial Singapore, with responsibilities to his growing family but no rights or privileges.

My more privileged father was able to sail – no airplanes then, by the way – to China for boarding school, university, and finally the US for post graduate studies on a scholarship.

By contrast, you graduate with the immediate rights of a Singapore citizen, the privileges of membership in an educated elite, but also responsibilities not only to your loved ones, but to the larger society to which you belong but also truly own.

Your quality education, global exposure, community service and unique pedagogy make you better informed, more intellectually agile and more articulate than not only your ancestors but even most of your own peers. Put these skills to good use.

Your privileged position as an SMU graduate compels you towards a responsibility to shape the Singapore you will live and prosper in. Civil society in Singapore will become

increasingly important in the collective governance of this nation, and whatever your chosen vocation, you can play a meaningful role in the many voices which make up civil society. And whether our increasingly complex society moves towards a more chaotic or a more cohesive diversity, will depend on you – more than you may think today, as just a fresh graduate coming into the working world.

Our Guest of Honour is one of the younger generation of leaders whom you will interact with in the next decade and more.

Some of you may already have met Mr Ong when he visited SMU in March, and later in June when he spoke about “The Future of Jobs, Skills and Higher Education” at The Straits Times Education Forum held in partnership with SMU.

Mr Ong has a First Class Honours degree in Economics from the London School of Economics and a MBA from the Institute of Management Development, Lausanne, Switzerland. He was Director of Group Strategy at Keppel Corporation, overseeing long term strategic planning of the Group’s activities. Then he became Deputy Secretary-General of NTUC, overseeing the Labour Movement’s employment and employability programmes.

Later, as Chief Executive of the Workforce Development Agency, he spearheaded many initiatives to build up the Continuing Education and Training infrastructure. He was the Principal Private Secretary to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong from 2003-2005, and Press Secretary to Prime Minister Lee from 1997-2003. Mr Ong was also the Deputy Chief Negotiator for the US-Singapore Free Trade Agreement.

He was elected MP for Sembawang GRC in September 2015 and appointed to the Cabinet as the Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) on 1 October 2015. He holds the concurrent appointment of Senior Minister of State for Defence.

It is a great honour to have him here today and we look forward to his valuable advice as you start the next stage of your journey.

Thank you.
