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Speech by Ms Yong Ying-I at SMU Convocation Ceremony

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Mr JY Pillay, Pro-Chancellor SMU

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman of SMU Board of Trustees, and Members of the Board of Trustees

Prof Arnoud De Meyer, SMU President; Faculty, Staff and Students of SMU

Parents and guests,

Good evening

I am delighted to join you tonight at the SMU Convocation. My warmest congratulations to all the students on your acceptance into SMU, and my congratulations too to your delighted parents.

Be the Force

2. By now, you would have heard Star Wars' most famous quotation countless times: "May the Force be with you". This too is my warmest wish for you as you start your journey in SMU.

3. As you sit here tonight, you may be wondering about the journey into the unknown. You may be thinking: what role can I play? How should I prepare myself for this role? Let me say your world is for you to create, literally. The roles you can choose to play and the jobs you can choose to take up when you graduate are far less scripted today compared to a decade ago.

4. Indeed, you are very fortunate to be a young person now. The digital world has made many things possible, both in terms of speed in which to get things done and in the variety of ways to get to the outcomes you want. So if you want to find creative solutions to the problems of the world, you can. And if you want to create a Starship to explore new worlds, you can do that too!

Towards a Smart Nation

5. Let me share a little about this idea of roles. I have several roles in the Singapore public sector. The twin roles of being in the Public Service Division and the Inforcomm Development Authority of Singapore present me with the unique

opportunity of being involved in developing our people, our talent, as well as developing Singapore's future in the digital world.

6. I want to share with you Singapore's exciting vision to be a Smart Nation, and the immense opportunities for you in that vision. What is a Smart Nation? It is about making use of technology to improve the way the city works and to improve the lives of our people. It is clean, green and uses resources more sustainably. For example, sensors across the city will give us data to plan our daily lives better – if we know when the bus is coming and whether it is crowded, we can decide whether we have time to finish our breakfast before catching that bus. With apps for example, we will know quickly should a loved one suddenly fall sick and need medical help.

7. Understanding data and being comfortable with using it will be a core skill in the digital world, whether you are studying Accountancy, Law, Economics, Info Systems or Social Sciences. Whether your career goal is to be an auditor, a business analyst, or a manager in the healthcare industry, your work will involve data. Companies analyse data to predict what customers want before they ask for it. Healthcare institutions and insurance companies use analytics to better manage patient care and contain treatment costs. Indeed, a talented girl who worked for me in the National Research Foundation told me this time last year that she was resigning. Why? She was joining the graduate masters programme in data analytics at SMU. I was sorry to lose her but told her that she was making the right decision to learn this valuable skill. She has an exciting career ahead of her.

8. Business models of every industry will be changed in the digital world. As Chairman Ho is in the hospitality industry, let me use that as an example. Most of us refer to TripAdvisor or some crowdsourced customer feedback app when we think about booking hotels. So hotel reputations are increasingly made more by what customers say than by brand exercises and advertisements. Hotels closely monitor the complaints that customers make online and they wonder how to better incentivise happy customers to also offer comments online.

9. You are right on time to take part in and take advantage of the new opportunities that the Smart Nation can offer, because much of it hasn't been invented yet. The digital world is a new chapter of innovation and creation that has levelled the playing field. Big companies can now be outcompeted by small companies or start-ups that develop new business models. Young people like you, who are digital natives, can once again be pioneers, doing things that others around the world will admire and want to join in. Your Chairman described SMU as being born from a Rebel Alliance to create A Different University. Since you chose it, I urge you to follow through by having an innovation mindset and approach to your studies. Create something of your own, don't just imitate others or stick to the status quo just because it has been working. Be the "Alternative". Dare to experiment, dare to take risks.

10. Star Wars is such an apt theme for today's event because many things first imagined in Sci Fi have become possible today. I confess that I am more a Star Trek fan than a Star Wars one. In Star Trek, there is a technology called the holodeck on the Starship Enterprise that allows the crew to experience a virtual city or world, in a

very real way. Well, a holodeck exists today. This year, Facebook paid billions to buy Oculus, the company that built the Oculus Rift which enables an immersive reality experience. How did this happen? – because someone dared to try to make it happen, for real.

My Innovation Journey in the Public Service

11. Allow me to share with you my own exploration and innovation journey in the Singapore Public Service. In the 1990s, Singapore recognised that convergence between IT and telecoms was taking place. The Government decided we could better seize the opportunity to take Singapore to the next level if we merged the National Computer Board and the Telecommunications Authority of Singapore, to form the Infocomm Development Authority. I was asked to spearhead the merger. Trust me, it was a huge step up. Till then, I had never run an organisation before, never mind built a new one. It was a leap of faith of the Government to offer me the role; I needed to be bold to take on the challenge, and be willing to invent new solutions because IDA was in a new space that wasn't defined. Looking back, I'm glad my colleagues and I were willing to be bold, willing to try new things.

12. This is what Singapore has been; we have been willing to take bold steps, we have been willing to try, even when there was no precedent. If Singapore had been happy to remain status quo, we would not have internet banking, mobile apps nor, of course, the wifi connection to the internet while this speech is going on! I'm not suggesting IDA made the infocomm technologies and new business models happen, but without our willingness to try new things, these would have happened in Singapore more slowly.

13. Some time after leaving IDA, I went to the Ministry of Health. At that time, there was an assumption that competition between healthcare providers was good, that competition would create greater efficiency, thereby lowering cost to patients and improving care. But this hypothesis did not gel with the reality we were experiencing.

14. In healthcare, patients are better cared for when institutions collaborate, so that patients with complicated problems can be sent to the relevant specialist, and the patient's medical records can be accessed wherever he is. Trainee doctors get the best training when they get attached to a broader mix of institutions and specialties.

15. But competition between our public sector institutions was limiting all these. We recognised the need to restructure, to change the way our healthcare institutions operated. This was a huge effort -- it meant changing governance frameworks, creating new institutions, getting buy-in from the huge numbers of healthcare professionals, and much more. "Building", "creating", "leading" are all part of the portfolio of management skills you will learn in your various classes at SMU. And I think healthcare in Singapore is better today because of the restructuring efforts. The system is far more coherent now, and patients are served in a more seamless way. The journey is far from over, so MOH continues to innovate.

16. Mind you, we could have failed many times during the journey of restructuring and transformation. Certainly, some of the ideas we tried did not work. Many of the IDA projects and healthcare transformation efforts were challenging, with many twists and turns during the journey. But I hope that my brief sharing will encourage you to explore new ideas in your SMU journey. I hope it will also encourage you to be resilient, and try again when your attempts aren't successful. It apparently took Thomas Edison 1,000 tries to invent the light bulb. After he revealed this, someone asked him, "Mr Edison, how did it feel to fail 999 times?" Thomas Edison replied, "I haven't failed 999 times. I have simply found 999 ways how not to create a light bulb". His experiments were not mistakes but learning opportunities. They were disciplined explorations of the idea, in a subject that he knew thoroughly but continued to learn anew. This leads me to mention the importance of hard work and discipline. Innovation is founded on knowing the subject well. To master the subject, we have to put in the hard work.

The bigger purpose of a University education

17. As we have just celebrated National Day, it would be remiss of me to only speak about exploring new stars and inventing new businesses, without talking about what education is really for. Singapore is a country with a very high standard of living, with exciting opportunities to offer our brightest and best talents like you. But Singapore will only hold together as a successful country and a society that others admire, if we remember that Singapore is not just about each individual. Singapore is also about all of us, together.

18. In the most prosperous of economies, there will be some pockets, hopefully small, that struggle to make ends meet. In the most egalitarian and united of societies, there will still be pockets of people who are left out. University graduates who are the best educated in society and likely to have the best opportunities, need to accept the responsibility to care for the greater good of the whole community, to look out for each other and care for the more vulnerable in our society. If you don't do it, who will?

19. Chairman made a point about the Star Wars' deep message of duality. You have a choice as to how to use the Force you will acquire. I understand that you will be taking the SMU pledge later. I looked it up and particularly liked the line that says you are committed to the pursuit of education "...with responsibility, integrity and humility, tempered with compassion for our fellowmen, as we strive for excellence." That is the spirit we all must have.

20. I hope you will not wait till you graduate to be connected with the broader community to offer your service. I hope you will serve and connect, even during your university journey. I hope you will find time to volunteer in the community, or do something that is helpful to others. It doesn't matter whether it is tutoring kids who are finding some subjects difficult, or lending a listening ear to lonely grannies, or delivering meals to home-bound elderly folk. Or writing a song for our SG50 celebrations, for that matter, if you have talent in that direction! Bring your classmates along with you, because you can do more when you do things as a team.

21. Do also remember that you share the responsibility of shaping how Singapore develops. It is an exciting responsibility. In a dense urban environment, we need to listen to others, even as we advocate our own views. We may not necessarily agree with each other all the time, but we should respect others as having a right to their opinions. It is important that we learn to work together, to talk together, so that we may live together peaceably, each able to find his space while sharing common space in Singapore. As students joining SMU today, you are part of the next generation that must contribute to this effort.

22. I am hopeful that you will rise to this responsibility. So may I modify the Star Wars wish to “May you be the Force that creates that better future for us all”.

23. And on that note, may I wish you a successful and enjoyable university journey and a bright future. Once again, my congratulations to you as you take your first steps in SMU.