

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, MINISTER FOR  
EDUCATION, AT THE SMU PRESIDENT'S  
FAREWELL AND HANDOVER CEREMONY,  
SMU HALL, FRIDAY, 16 NOVEMBER 2018**

Madam President

Dr Tony Tan

Mr J Y Pillay

Mr Ho Kwon Ping

Members of the Board

Professor Arnoud De Meyer

Professor Lily Kong

Distinguished guests

SMU faculty, staff, alumni and students

1. I am sure many of us are attending tonight's event with mixed emotions. On the one hand, we are sad to bid farewell to SMU's longest-serving President, Professor Arnoud De Meyer. On the other hand, we are happy to see a smooth leadership transition, as Professor Lily Kong – someone very familiar and admired by many of us – assumes the role as SMU's new President.

**Visionary Leader in the Higher Education Landscape**

2. There is a lot to say about Arnoud, because he has accomplished and contributed so much. But what comes to mind is a down-to-earth, but visionary leader, and a pragmatic academic.

3. Prior to SMU, Arnoud served in INSEAD for more than two decades, and was the founding Dean of INSEAD's Asia Campus in Singapore from 1999-2002. That was also the period when I first met Arnoud, often at Government task force and committee meetings. He ran INSEAD Singapore with conviction, because he strongly believed in Asia's growing potential and recognised the role that INSEAD could play in developing talent in our part of the world.

4. As a key advocate for INSEAD to open an Asia campus in Singapore, I am sure he had many detractors, especially having to weather through the 1997 Financial Crisis, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the SARS outbreak in 2003. These unfortunate events had repercussions to the recruitment of faculty, students, and executive education clients.

5. But ultimately, Arnoud's conviction was vindicated. Today, INSEAD has a vibrant campus in Singapore, and applicants to INSEAD want to come to Singapore. The Dean of INSEAD today sits in the Singapore campus, not Fontainebleau. Singapore is proud to host such a renowned

education institution. It is a feather in our cap, and Arnoud played a large part in making this possible.

6. Arnoud joined SMU in 2010, where he once again demonstrated his visionary yet pragmatic traits as an academic. At SMU, Arnoud keeps himself close to the ground through his continual interaction with SMU's key stakeholders – students, faculty, business and education leaders. He takes great pleasure in engaging educators – especially secondary and JC principals – to underscore the importance of preparing students for the future, through the learning of innovation and entrepreneurial skills.

7. He is a firm believer of the academic's role in teaching. To walk his talk, he co-taught classes at SMU, despite his heavy commitment as President. That way, he could stay up-to-date on the dynamics of the classroom and the pre-occupations of students today.

8. In describing Arnoud's contribution to SMU, one has to mention SMU-X. The brainchild of Arnoud, SMU-X is a pedagogical innovation that allows students to work with companies and social organisations to tackle real-life problems. SMU-X enables students to apply what they learnt in a practical, multi-discipline environment. It helps students build up essential soft skills which can only be acquired through experience.

9. Because the issues they are engaging with are real, SMU-X develops a sense of personal agency in students, who experience what it is like to make a real difference in industry, society, or the community. In the process, it engenders self-awareness, sparks passion, and motivates them to delve deeper into their areas of expertise.

10. SMU-X has opened up new possibilities at SMU. Students have a broad platform for practical learning. Faculty are provided with necessary support and resources – but I know nobody will say it is enough – to make the programme a success. Best practices and findings from SMU-X are shared with both local and international educational institutions.

11. That said, SMU-X is only one aspect of the quality education at SMU. SMU graduates are in great demand by employers, and have consistently shown good employment outcomes over the years. The majority of SMU students are offered jobs prior to graduation, and six months after graduation, employment rates exceed 90%. Starting salaries are rising, and beyond full-time employment, graduates are also venturing into technology start-ups or becoming entrepreneurs.

12. My most recent memory of Arnoud's contribution was during the 11<sup>th</sup> International Academic Advisory Panel (IAAP) meeting in June this year. The IAAP is an international panel that advises the Singapore

Government on the development of Singapore's university education and research landscape.

13. At this year's meeting, Arnoud spoke about the need to re-look the evaluation of universities based on the objectives of each university. Many people are aware of my concerns over international university ranking systems, because they tend to focus on research publications and underplay the importance of teaching and making an impact on society. In this regard, Arnoud has been my accomplice. Arnoud's advice at the IAAP is that instead of being measured against standard KPIs set by international ranking agencies, each university should be evaluated according to its distinctive objectives, in education, lifelong learning, research or enterprise. MOE is studying this issue with our Autonomous Universities.

14. Outside of education, Arnoud also contributed his time and knowledge generously to various Government committees, such as being a member of the Future Economy Council under the Committee on the Future Economy. His views have always been frank, pertinent, and incisive. Today, as we are implementing the recommendations of the Committee through 23 Industry Transformation Maps (ITMs), Arnoud would make it a point to share the ITMs with SMU faculty and leadership

as and when one is rolled out. This encouraged alignment between the education provided at SMU and the broader Singapore economic strategy.

15. Arnoud is also invested in contributing to Singapore's development as a vibrant science and technology hub as a Board member of the National Research Foundation.

16. As a member of the Advisory Council on Community Relations in Defence, of which I served as Chairman for a short period, he has also been working with educational institutions to gain support and recognition for National Service among students and parents.

17. He is also Non-Executive Director of Human Capital Leadership, which facilitates leadership development, as well as Board Director of the Singapore Symphonia Company.

18. From technology research to defence to music – we have many things to thank Arnoud for.

19. While this is a farewell ceremony, I am happy to say that Professor De Meyer is not leaving SMU nor Singapore, so this is not a goodbye speech. Arnoud will still be around, contributing to SMU, education, and

Singapore. The Ministry of Education would like to place on record our gratitude for your contribution in making a significant difference to the education landscape in Singapore.

20. Arnoud is handing the torch over to Professor Lily Kong, the current Provost of SMU. Lily is well known to all of us, with stellar achievements in academia, research and teaching, at NUS and now at SMU. Lily had personally spearheaded the SMU Blue Ribbon Commission on Undergraduate Education which completed a review of its undergraduate curriculum earlier this year. The vision that Lily has articulated on developing graduates who have an independent mind, are dependable in deeds, think deeply and broadly, and create value at home and abroad, shows that SMU will, under her leadership, continue to build on its foundation of innovative pedagogy, and establish its legacy.

21. I wish both Arnoud and Lily all the very best, including in their continuing efforts to develop our higher education landscape.

22. Thank you.