

CASE Asia Pacific Leadership Award 2026

Acceptance Speech by SMU President Prof Lily Kong

8 May, Friday, 9am, Brisbane

CASE President and CEO Sue Cunningham

Ladies and Gentlemen

Walking with meaning

Biennially, I lace up my shoes and set myself a target for our community race, a fundraiser event that we affectionately call the SMOO Challenge. One year, I managed 100 km over ten days; another year, I managed 250 km over 21 days. I'm not sure how many more SMOO Challenges my knees will withstand. But for as long as I can do it, I will. For it is a special occasion to rally alumni, students, colleagues and friends around a shared cause. At SMU, we walk so that no student is left behind for lack of financial means. We believe talent should never be limited by circumstance; that education should not be inherited privilege.

I open with this story about SMOO Challenge because it stands out in my leadership journey as a reminder of why I do what I do, to open doors for those who come after us. And in doing so, I remember those who came before me who generously opened the doors for me.

To those who came before us and those who surround us today

Early in my academic career, when I was still finding my footing, I had the good fortune of being shaped by mentors who believed in possibility before there was proof. One of them was my Head of Department, who was deeply committed to nurturing younger scholars. At a time when a social sciences research grant of significant scale was almost unheard of, we fought hard for a proposal we were putting forward — because she believed younger academics should be given the chance to do meaningful work at a scale that mattered. Still earlier, another mentor, who then had only known me for a few months, trusted me enough that her husband agreed to be guarantor for my undergraduate scholarship, even though he had never met me. It was an extraordinary act of generosity — trust before proof, belief before certainty. They widened the road before me, and I have never forgotten that.

The Chinese have a saying that fittingly captures this sentiment: *yin shui si yuan* — when you drink the water, remember with gratitude those who dug the well before you. We need to think about universities thus, because none of us stands on ground we made entirely by ourselves.

So, an award for leadership, while always an incredible honour, is always also a slightly uncomfortable tribute to accept, because leadership is never a singular act. It belongs also to the people who believed before the results existed, who built before recognition came, and who stayed long after the applause faded. I receive this honour from CASE in that spirit.

I do so with deep gratitude to our former SMU Chair Ho Kwon Ping who believed in me enough to appoint me – the first Singaporean – to the president’s role at SMU, and the first Singaporean woman to lead any university in Singapore. I am grateful to our current Chair Piyush Gupta and the Board of Trustees for their trust, counsel and belief in our University’s purpose.

I share the award with colleagues across SMU who give of themselves daily, who are committed to making a difference through the myriad work they do, and especially to those colleagues who undertake the patient work of relationship-building — our alumni and advancement teams, as well as those in Schools and offices, who actively steward the relationships and deliver the outcomes and impact that matter. I share this moment with our benefactors and alumni who continue to place their trust in us; and most of all, with our students, because they are the reason for our work.

I would also like to acknowledge the wider Asia-Pacific advancement community gathered here today, and congratulate CASE for the important work you do in championing this profession — not only in advancement, but across alumni relations, communications, and the many forms of relationship-building that help institutions thrive.

I see you, and you belong here: building a community

Central to these relationships are the ties we build with our students. After we admit them, the real work begins — ensuring that they can stay, thrive, and believe they belong once they walk through our doors. A scholarship may help a student enter university, but belonging requires much more.

Financial aid relieves a family's burden for sure, and a global exposure grant makes possible an opportunity that would otherwise have remained out of reach. But often, it is something less visible that turns tangible financial support into something deeper and felt. It is the colleague who notices the student who has stopped speaking in class. It is recognising that what looks like academic struggle may in fact be fear, exhaustion, caregiving responsibilities, or simply the loneliness of feeling out of place. Very often, transformation begins not with a grand intervention, but with someone saying: I see you, and you belong here.

This is why I believe advancement begins with the work of raising funds, but does not end there. It extends to the work of widening possibility and building community. Some of the most meaningful gifts to SMU have come not only from Singapore, but from across the region — from alumni, families, and communities in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and beyond, who understand that investing in education can be an act of regional responsibility. They widen possibility by supporting cross-border student mobility; and they build community that transcends boundaries.

Advancing alumni opportunities

Students therefore give me purpose. But I want to pay tribute to alumni, who show me what is possible. Every time I meet our graduates, I leave with the same feeling: wonderment. I hear about the lives they have built, the risks taken, the communities served, and companies founded. They remind me that a university's work is never finished at graduation. As I have elaborated elsewhere, universities must stop thinking of ourselves as four-year institutions and start thinking of ourselves as sixty-year institutions. The relationship with students does not end with a degree. If we are doing our work well, it deepens with time. We walk with our students into alumnihood, and we remain a relevant resource to them, whether for continuing development or career advice. In turn, our alumni walk back with us — as mentors, volunteers, advocates, and yes, sometimes as benefactors.

Advancing society and economy

Even as we seek to develop our students and advance alumni opportunities, universities have a responsibility to advance society and economy. Some of the defining questions of this century are urgently in need of answers: questions around how we live, how we work and how we age. How are cities to be made liveable and lovable, how should we respond to climate change, how do we prepare people for a future of work that is changing faster than our institutions often do, and how are societies to age with dignity? Our five-year strategic plan, SMU2030, puts the spotlight on these areas as key priorities, and our three new research institutes are built precisely around these very questions. When we address compelling issues and help to drive solutions, we advance society and economy. In this, we are supported by benefactors, alumni and partners.

Philanthropy and trust

But philanthropy follows trust, before it follows strategy. One of the clearest lessons I have learned is that people do not give because they are persuaded by a campaign. They give because they believe they belong to something worth sustaining. They return because the relationship is genuine. This explains the repeat donor who feels involved in the mission and life of the university. It explains why alumni give back, because they remember what it meant when someone once believed in them.

Some of the true unsung heroes of advancement are therefore those working quietly at the back end — the colleagues who steward relationships with sincerity and care. The thank-you note written after the gala dinner. The difficult conversation handled with grace. The donor remembered not only for their gift, but for their grief, their family, and their hopes.

That is why this CASE recognition matters. You honour our institutions, and the invisible architecture of care that makes institutions worthy of trust. And in a world where higher education is often judged by rankings, revenue and speed, you remind us that the deeper work of universities is slower, more human, and infinitely important.

Thank you.

[1,363 words | 10 mins allocated]