

Honourary Doctorate Speech by Yip Pin Xiu

A very good afternoon to

Guest of Honour Dr Leow Kah Shin

Chancellor Mr Lim Chee Onn

Pro Chancellor Mr Kuok Khoon Ean

Justice Judith Prakash

Chairman Mr Piyush Gupta

and members of the board of trustees

President Professor Lily Kong

Provost Professor Alan Chan

Senior Management, faculty, distinguished guests, proud families and friends, and most importantly, congratulations to the Graduating Class of 2026.

Today is a very special day for all of us. I am deeply honoured to receive an honorary doctorate from SMU. I remember what it felt like to be sitting where you are now when I was graduating from SMU 10 years ago. Feeling excited and a little bit fearful about the future, but perhaps mostly wondering what's next.

The wonderful thing about graduation is you leave with a degree after years of hard work. You also leave with the opportunity to decide what kind of person you want to become.

I have a disability called Charcot Marie Tooth and that causes my muscles to deteriorate over time. While the rest of the kids had friends and could play amongst themselves, I was ostracised. Often struggling to get from place to place, hoping that people could not tell that I was different. I know what it feels like to be judged before being known.

When I was a child, there were many things people assumed I would never be able to do. Live on my own, get married, swim, travel, enjoy life.

And perhaps the hardest thing about growing up with a disability is not always the physical challenge. It is the limitations that other people create before I even had the chance to discover my own possibilities.

For a long time, I had to learn how to separate the limits that existed in the world from the limits that existed only in the minds of others.

When I was growing up, there was a lack of representation of people with disabilities in the world around me. My mum and I read about Chia Yong Yong, a lawyer who has muscular atrophy who also uses a wheelchair and after that my mum told me that I should study very hard and be a lawyer.

My mum was worried about my future. She was worried about what would happen to me if one day, my body could no longer do the things it used to do. She wanted to make sure that I would still have my voice and a way to build a life for myself. My parents always believed in giving me a normal life. A life that my brothers had too. So, when they went for piano classes, I would go even though I was losing hand function. When they went for swimming classes I would go even though I had trouble balancing on land.

Now 25 years later, I am a professional athlete, a very physical job and I guess after today, also a Honorary Doctor of Laws. Look ma, I guess we can have it all but only because the people closest to me never limited my life. (Address my family)

How different would things have been if we had listened to others who said that I couldn't do sports because I have a disability, if we believed the aunties in the lift mumbling amongst themselves that my life would be very poor thing.

We had the strength to ignore these naysayers and I am so thankful to that because things would be so different if we did not. I had people wanting the best for me, supporting my ambitions. Also a stubborn personality. Enough to challenge the bar.

I was fortunate that they gave me the opportunity to try. And because of that, I discovered I was capable of far more than I had ever imagined.

People mocked. You cannot even walk properly, you want to swim?

I became a swimmer.

Then I became a competitive swimmer.

And eventually, I stood on the world's biggest sporting stage.

Today, I am incredibly proud to say that I am a seven-time Paralympic gold medallist. I have been a part of the narrative of how Singapore has changed the way we see disability and ability. I have been a part of the inclusion movement.

As graduates, you have spent years learning about markets, incentives, the many forces that shape the world around us. But there is one concept I wish we could all study a little more deeply and that is the concept of bias.

We make quick judgments based on someone's appearance, their background, their nationality, their religion, their gender, their disability, their education — anything that is essentially different from ourselves

People have made assumptions about what I cannot do before I even had the chance to show them. They saw the disability and assumed they knew the whole story.

We all do this to one another in different ways.

And perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing our world today is that we are becoming increasingly divided by the things that make us different.

We live in a time when it is very easy to find people who agree with us.

And slowly, without even noticing, we can build a world where everyone around us thinks exactly the same way we do but that is not unity. That is simply being comfortable.

Unity does not mean that we all think the same or that we all share the same beliefs.

Unity means that despite our differences, we still choose to see each other as human beings first. And I believe that is something the world desperately needs right now.

We are living through a time of immense uncertainty. We see conflict between countries. division within societies.

I want to challenge you today to think differently about your role in this world. You will make decisions that affect people you may never meet.

I hope you remember that behind every number is a person.

It is easy to talk about efficiency.

But who gets left behind or forgotten in the pursuit of efficiency?

The next time you meet someone who is very different from you, ask yourself what's their story? And when we take the time to listen, we become aware of our personal biases, less afraid of our differences.

Throughout my journey as an athlete, I have learned that success is never achieved alone. And I think that lesson applies far beyond sport.

Whether you are building a business, leading a team, you will need other people. So don't surround yourself only with people who agree with you.

Find people who will respectfully challenge your thinking.

And when you disagree, remember that disagreement does not have to become division.

We can have different beliefs and still care about one another, still work towards the same future. That, to me, is unity.

If there are 3 things I can offer you today from my own life, it is this.

1. Find an amazing healthy support network in your life. Build friendships build relationships and they will help you thrive.
2. When there is an opportunity. Don't doubt yourself. If other people present you with it, they think you are ready for it and you should too.
3. We all have the same 24 hours. You can decide what you want to do with it. Prioritise the things that matter.

One day, years from now, I hope you look back and realise that your greatest contribution was not simply what you achieved for yourself, but what you did for the people around you as well.

The future will be shaped by the choices you make.

And I hope you choose empathy over assumption and unity over fear.

So, to the graduating class of 2026:

congratulations, and I wish each and every one of you an incredible journey ahead. And while you do, remember to bring others with you.

Thank you.

