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SMU Commencement for Class of 2023

Opening Ceremony

SMU Hall, 25 July 2023

Speech by Guest-of-Honour Justice Judith Prakash

Mr Lim Chee Onn, Chancellor of Singapore Management University,

Mr Eddie Teo, Pro-Chancellor

Mr Piyush Gupta, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, and Members of the Board of Trustees,

Professor Lily Kong,

Mr JY Pillay, former Chancellor and Honorary Degree Recipient

Faculty, staff and the class of 2023,

Parents, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Good afternoon. And I must admit that I hardly recognise myself on the great [introduction by Mr Piyush Gupta]. And hearty congratulations to all the graduands here today. Thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic, your academic journey has been an unconventional one. You had to adapt alongside the University through the various phases of the pandemic, and constantly evolve in your ways of learning, making friends and building community. You have shown tremendous perseverance and determination. I am sure your parents and professors are immensely proud of you, having watched you emerge from these unique circumstances to achieve your goals.

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2. Singapore Management University (“SMU”) started with just a handful of faculties and resources. Over the years, it has grown into a well-respected tertiary educational institution. This development is a testament to the hard work of faculty, management, and students like you who have entrusted their academic and professional training to SMU in the belief that it will prepare you for the challenges ahead in this ever-changing world. I am happy to assure you today that your trust has been well rewarded.
3. I went through a similar graduation ceremony 49 years ago in a venue that is now no more—the National Theatre. Not only was Singapore very different physically then, but also life here moved to different rhythms. All mail was snail mail—to ensure same day delivery of letters, law firms had to employ delivery clerks to deliver them by hand. Law firms were much smaller—the biggest law firm had only 22 lawyers – a minnow in today’s legal world. And when you visited law offices you could be forgiven for thinking you were back in the 19th century – dusty rooms filled with paper files and clerks bent over their typewriters clacking away. I am sure that not many of the graduates here today have even seen a typewriter. However, after a day’s work, when I went home in the

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evening, I was free – free of my bosses and free of my clients. No client knew how to contact me outside of office hours. Now no one can run away from anyone else—you are followed everywhere by e-mail, WhatsApp, and live video calls over the internet. Wherever in the world you or your boss or your client may be, you can be found and tasked with an urgent piece of work. Life has speeded up and the changes continue to multiply as I am sure you are all fully aware.

4. We are currently undergoing what the World Economic Forum terms as the “Fourth Industrial Revolution”. This is characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres. We live in an era where machines learn, robots collaborate with humans, and technologies such as artificial intelligence (“AI”), the internet of things, blockchain, and quantum computing are not mere buzzwords, but everyday realities shaping our lives. The apprehension that AI might supersede us, replacing human effort and intellect, is understandable. However, I would like to urge you to consider another perspective.
5. Every industrial revolution, from the advent of mechanized production in the first, to the digital revolution of the third, brought with it anxieties about job displacement. Yet, with each wave of change, we saw not just

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the disappearance of some jobs but also the creation of new ones and even the emergence of entire industries like web design and software development. These led to others like cybersecurity, and data science roles. And it is certainly true that in all cases of technological development, it is the imaginative human input that enables the greatest development and the most beneficial use of that technology. You need only think of the multi-billion dollar business of online retailing – it was started in 1979 by an English inventor who combined a modified TV, a transaction processing computer and a telephone line to create electronic shopping. A few years later along came Jeff Bezos – his development of the Amazon bookselling site brought online shopping to the masses where it has taken a firm hold and provided the foundation for a whole new logistics industry.

6. The key lies in our ability to discern and imagine, adapt and evolve. These are all qualities that AI does not have and this is where your education at SMU comes to the fore. The university has provided you with curated courses on managing volatility, uncertainty and complexity in the business and legal context so as to prepare you, as much as possible, for black swan events such as the global pandemic and the rise of an uncertain geopolitical environment. It has taught you critical thinking and

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judgement. It has also enhanced your knowledge of how to work with others to achieve a common goal.

7. As Steve Jobs once said, “Technology alone is not enough—it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing”.
8. I hope what I have said about technology thus far helps you as you consider the future. I am aware however that technology is only one of the areas that concerns new graduates. What you may be spending more time thinking about is how you will or should navigate this brave new world of adulthood that is opening up before you.
- 9 I remember being both happy and nervous as I graduated. Yes, I had a degree but what was going to happen to me next? Until graduation, my life had developed almost in lockstep with those of my university classmates from primary school thru secondary school to university and then to graduation. But thereafter we moved in a myriad of ways. Some joined the legal service, some general government service while others went into private practice or became in-house counsel. As the years passed, our paths diverged even further. In March next year about 35 of my classmates are gathering in KL to celebrate the 50th anniversary of our graduation. Some are lawyers still, often with their own firms. But,

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interestingly, we also include a doctor of psychology who both lectures and counsels, we have a leading light in insurance circles, a priest, the former owner of an etiquette school, and those who made their marks in finance, the oil and gas industry, and other areas of business. My classmates have marched to many different drums and in many countries: Malaysia, Australia, and China, among others.

- 10 As you take your first steps in truly adult life, the path ahead may seem intimidating and endless. Indeed, as a young lawyer or junior officer in any profession, one feels all at sea. Everything one has learnt seems to be theory and of no practical use. As a trainee, I would wonder how qualified lawyers knew what to write in the letters of demand they sent out. The good news is that you aren't expected to know it all from the beginning. I do not know of any law firm or other outfit that believes in throwing a new graduate in at the deep end when she does not know how to swim.
- 11 You will find that the habits and discipline that got you to this auditorium this afternoon will continue to hold you in good stead. Start humbly, be patient, listen more than you talk and always remember not only to work hard but also to actively cooperate with and assist your bosses and your colleagues. Soon enough, you will get into the swing of things and find yourselves becoming more productive and confident. Always be aware

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that careers develop at different paces and in different directions. At times you may think you are stagnating, while others are racing ahead, but do not be discouraged-you are always learning things that will come in useful sometime in your life. You should also bear in mind that as adults you will not simply be workers but will have several identities determined by your passions in life. You will be spouses, parents, community workers, sports people, leaders of professional and other organisations, to name a few. Indeed, you may find your side hustles develop into lasting and rewarding careers or avocations.

- 12 The horizon of your lives is no longer bounded by the academic year as it has been until now. In one's growing years there is obvious change every year but once you leave formal education, your goals and your ability to assess your own achievements are less clearcut. There is no reason to worry if you don't seem to be stepping up every year. You might take some time to find an area that truly suits you. I spent the first 8 years of my legal life trying to be a litigator. I enjoyed the glamour of robing up and appearing in court, but really I was not a very good court lawyer. For one thing, I had a tendency to agree when opponents pointed out flaws in my case and thus my rebuttal was weaker than it should have been. When, for various reasons, I moved into transactional work, I found it suited me

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much better to be building legal structures than tearing them down. And my current life as an adjudicator suits me most of all because I can consider all sides and do not have to advocate for a particular view.

- 13 In all areas of my working life, I learnt that communication is the key skill. It is not easy to communicate clearly. So, I hope you don't mind my giving you some advice. As a judge, to me language and expression are key indicators of clarity in thought and persuasiveness. Grammar and vocabulary deserve attention. Lawyers tend to think that legalese and bombastic language make them appear more learned. But this is not so: big words and pomposity are usually irritating and make the listener switch off. Avoid them. Arguments and advice should be contained in straight forward sentences without excessive qualification. Don't go round and round the point-that only provokes impatience. Make sure you know the meaning of the words you are using. Wrong usage makes the hearer question your knowledge. Don't for example describe a judgment as "poignant" – that word means "evoking sadness or regret". It does not mean "pertinent". And while I am here let me tell you my pet peeve – lawyers who describe a witness's evidence as "incredulous" when they mean "incredible". I have been correcting that mistake for decades. Make sure you know what you are saying, do not assume it. Okay, lecture over.

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14 As you step out into the working world, carry with you the spirit of adaptability, the courage to embrace change, and the resilience to carve out your own path. Once again, congratulations and I wish all of you the very best ahead. Thank you.

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