

Speech by Professor Lily Kong, 15th S R Nathan Fellow

Book Launch of “Universities Reinvented:

Shaping Legacy and Impact for a New World”

12 August 2025, 5.30pm, Lobby, Oei Tiong Ham Building, LKYSP

Minister for Education and Minister-in-Charge of Social Services Integration,

Mr Desmond Lee,

Director, IPS, Janadas Devan,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

I am grateful that so many of you have come today to help me launch my book “Universities Reinvented: Shaping Legacy and Impact for a New World”. To reinvent universities for a new world begs the fundamental question: what is a university for in such a world. It is the central question underpinning the book.

Let me begin by expressing my sincere thanks to Minister for making time to be here. It is perhaps the first occasion for you, since becoming Minister for Education, to make a public commentary on higher education, and I am honoured that it is at my book launch.

I am also grateful to the Institute of Policy Studies and its Director Janadas Devan for the honour of my appointment as the 15th SR Nathan Fellow last year, which offered me the opportunity to share my thoughts through the three lectures that are now inscribed in this book.

The Three Lectures and Beyond

Across my lectures, I sought to explore how universities might navigate a world in flux — one marked by shifting demographics, widening inequalities, geopolitical tensions, environmental challenges, and a rapidly changing world of work. The first lecture traced the origins and evolution of the university, reminding us that reinvention has always been part of its DNA. From religiously-rooted institutions to feeders for bureaucracies, from cultivating intellectual development for its own sake, to privileging utilitarian and functional roles for economies, universities have reinvented themselves in different times and places.

The second lecture asked how we might educate for the 100-year life, and what that means for both students and institutions. I advocate for an education that goes much beyond the sort of cognitive development we are accustomed to, one that accentuates human qualities in the face of the technological juggernaut, and one that privileges continuing lifelong engagement rather than a short sprint in one's 20s. The third lecture turned to the question of research and its impact — how we might signal and value what truly matters, beyond the conventional metrics of prestige and performance.

Since delivering these lectures, I've been heartened — and humbled — by the many conversations they have sparked. Whether in local academic or policy circles, the UK House of Lords, international academic journals, practitioner publications or podcasts, the ideas have travelled farther and wider than I could have imagined. I'm grateful to all who have engaged, challenged, and built upon them.

Writing the lectures gave me immense satisfaction, precisely because the process challenged me to sharpen my understanding about higher education and, perhaps more importantly, strengthen my convictions. While the power of ideas cannot be underestimated, change is effected only when ideas are translated into institutional reforms. And this is precisely what I seek to do at my own university.

If learning is to extend beyond the cognitive, then we have introduced scaffolds of support for non-cognitive learning, particularly beyond the classroom. Launching our Co-Curricular Transcript is not about adding to the rat race, but about developing a structured, university-wide initiative that valorises other intelligences, such as intra- and interpersonal intelligences. As a parallel transcript that sits alongside an academic one, the Co-Curricular Transcript gives weight to experiences like community service, global exposure, student clubs, sports, and the reflections that follow from these opportunities. It allows us to affirm that character, citizenship, and personal growth are not ancillary — they are as central to higher education as knowledge and technical skills.

In research, going beyond the standard academic metrics in faculty performance management is critical to the endeavour of cultivating an ethos of research for societal benefit. At SMU therefore, we are in the midst of a cultural shift, supported by structural changes in policy and organisation, including widening performance metrics, and the establishment of an Office of Impact.

These examples of concrete steps being taken reflect a conviction about what a university is for in this age. They go beyond thought leadership that takes the form of op eds, conference speeches, and sound bites to actual action institution-wide to reinvent a university.

Unwritten Lectures

I cannot resist the opportunity of this occasion to share some extended thinking about higher education. Had there been a **fourth lecture** in the series, I might have turned to ask how universities in Asia can play a role in realising the promise of an Asian Century through reinvention. For decades, much of the regional conversation has centred on how to catch up: to global rankings, legacy models, and criteria and standards defined elsewhere. Perhaps the more urgent question now is this: What might it mean for Asian universities to lead — not just by competing, but by defining success on our own terms? As I shared in a recent Straits Times op ed, a senior professor in one of the best US universities mused in a late night zoom conversation with me about the post-colonial twist, in which recent challenges facing US higher education may represent what she called the “last vestiges of empire” to fall. She held out hope for universities in Asia, and Southeast Asia, in particular — universities such as SMU — to be sources of light in a darkening world.

Anchored in a belief in contextual relevance, post-colonial confidence and regional partnerships, SMU is responding with both humility and clarity. Through our overseas centres in Jakarta, Bangkok, and Ho Chi Minh City and deeply engaged International Advisory Councils in the region, we are building long-term partnerships rooted in trust and mutual learning. These are not just extensions of campus — they are opportunities to co-create knowledge and develop human capital within the region in ways that speak to local needs, histories, cultures and promise.

Had there been a fifth lecture, I would have turned the gaze still closer in, to university leaders and academics. I have been mulling over the idea of moral courage — and how that quiet, often invisible quality underpins our ability to lead institutions with integrity, and to act on a daily basis driven by our moral compass. The moral foundations of institutional leadership and individual action are rarely foregrounded in discussions about higher education.

This courage is not exercised through dramatic gestures, but through measured choices: what to research, to prioritise, to support, to reward; what to stand for. How to balance our role as educators and researchers. Perhaps our discomfort about shifting our mental and actual models of higher education is actually discomfort about ourselves and a worry about how our well-honed time-honoured measures of success may be threatened. The moral courage of institutional leaders to challenge and even break the mould is therefore critical for institutions to be anchored in purpose – whether it is enabling social mobility and cultivating citizenship through our educational endeavours, building enterprise, or contesting long-standing policies and practices.

A Continuing Conversation

Let me return to the book that is already written, and the question I posed at the beginning: *What is a university for?* My hope is that a university will always be for the discovery of knowledge, serving as a brain trust for society, a font of new ideas, technologies and perspectives that make for better lives. My hope is that universities contribute to the formation of character and empowerment of lives, in as much as they cultivate domain knowledge and technical skills. My hope too is that universities will be the public square — for dialogue and for the dignity of ideas.

Our legacy, our impact, and our relevance will be defined by our willingness and capacity to continually reinvent ourselves to these ends. That was true too for Mr S R Nathan, whose life journey, from humble beginnings to the highest office of the land, reminds us that leadership is not about certainty, but about conviction in the face of complexity. In a world that demands both adaptability and moral clarity, this spirit must remain true for the universities that carry these values forward.

I offer *Universities Reinvented* as my contribution to conversations unfolding about higher education reform. May it be a stimulus, inviting policymakers, university leaders, academics, industry, and community stakeholders to collaborate thoughtfully in shaping higher education and societies into ones that are resilient, responsive, and relevant.

Once again, my thanks to Minister, Janadas, and my moderators at the lectures.

Special thanks to my colleagues from SMU and those from IPS, whose care, rigour and humour made the lectures and publication possible.

Thank you very much.

(1,400 words; 14-15 mins)