

**SMU Commencement 2022, Opening Ceremony
Held on 26 July 2022**

Speech by Mr Ho Kwon Ping

SMU Honorary Patron and Honorary Degree Recipient, Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam
Chancellor of Singapore Management University, Mr Lim Chee Onn;
Pro-Chancellor, Mr Eddie Teo;
Members of the Board of Trustees;
Professor Lily Kong, President of SMU,
Faculty, staff, and the Class of 2022;
Parents and guests

Welcome to SMU Commencement 2022.

This year marks yet another unusual milestone for SMU. This year's cohort is the first class since COVID 19 began to actually have a Commencement ceremony on the year of your graduation itself.

You also have the dubious honour of being the one class that has spent the most time during your life at SMU in the Covid situation. But despite your not having been able to get together in classrooms as you would have liked to, I think you really have shown strength through adversity. And I think you are very fortunately, unlike the last two cohorts, you are now graduating during a much better Singapore and world environment.

Today also marks another curious milestone for SMU – and particularly for Dr Tony Tan and me. It was exactly a quarter-century ago in 1997 that Dr Tony Tan, then Deputy Prime Minister, invited me to create Singapore's third university. That meeting became a 25-year journey with meaningful and memorable milestones.

It is therefore with a poignant sense of coming full circle that the institution which we started together is able to honour Dr Tan today with an honorary doctorate.

When Dr Tan and I first met to conceptualize what finally became Singapore Management University, it did not even have a name, nor a logo, much less notions of what faculties to develop or campus to locate within.

Dr Tan certainly had his ideas backed by impressive academic and governmental qualifications, whereas I had only strong views about what a meaningful university education should not be, having not finished from the first university, gotten kicked out of the second and finally barely graduating as an over-aged student from the third.

So, we were quite an odd couple in certain ways. ... But we did have some basic notions – first principles, Dr Tan called them – which guided us throughout the creation of SMU.

To be publicly funded but autonomous was one such principle. To focus on and excel in the social sciences and management – Singapore's only real resource – was another. To

deliver a holistic and broad-based education resulting in well-rounded, initiative-taking young men and women was yet another. To instil a strong sense of personal and social responsibility was perhaps the final first principles of what finally was named Singapore Management University.

In some ways, we were perhaps an odd couple – Dr Tan quite cerebral, soft spoken but very clear-minded and me, quite brash and rash. Somehow, we clicked, and with the contributions of many other people – the pioneer faculty and management team of SMU and its initial cohorts of very adventurous students – willing to be among the first batch in an as-yet unproven university --SMU took off and never looked back.

This year's cohort is the 19th – hardly a blip in the life of centuries-old universities, but for those of us who remember SMU as a temporary structure in a car park and now long torn down, it signals that SMU has come a long way. The early batches of graduates are now in their forties, many married with children, and all already very successful in their chosen careers.

None of you graduands today however, was even born when your pioneer predecessors entered SMU. So, there is already the beginning of a generational gap between our cohorts – and that is a good thing.

It means that we have finally become mature enough for the tensions of change to occur within the continuity of tradition.

In its initial years of existence, when SMU was a blank slate; whenever I, or faculty members, or students for that matter, did anything new, we virtually initiated a new tradition. A young institution, like a young country or a new start-up, is audacious to a fault, fearing nothing including the fear of failure. For Singapore and SMU, the heady days of creating traditions from scratch, were exciting.

There have been sighs and laments of late, by new cohorts of students that SMU is now less exciting than before because it has matured and become somewhat set in its ways. After all, graduates of Singapore's other universities now emulate the articulate, independent-thinking, initiative-creating SMU graduates who bear the SMU hallmark of education. We are losing some of our USP, our edginess, they say.

No doubt, some of that is true, and our society is the better for it, that more young Singaporeans think, act, and behave like SMU students.

However, it would be very wrong for you and future cohorts of SMU students to think that because you entered or will enter SMU when its formative teenage years are over, to think that the opportunity – no, the responsibility – to innovate, to transform, to create new traditions and overturn obsolete ones – are gone.

The saying that in life change is the only certainty, must resonate in everything we do, whether as a young, fresh graduate or a newly minted septuagenarian like me.

For example, when we first set up SMU, we never thought that a few years later we would have a Law School encouraged by Dr Tan. Nor SMU-X, which became in some ways a game-changer. And now, SMU has set up a new and innovative College for Integrative Studies, and also a soon to be launched College for Graduate Research Studies. We just cannot sit still, it seems.

SMU itself is changing by the day, with each new president, dean, professor and student, doing what our visionary slogan tells us to do: IMAGINE BETTER. And then of course, to act upon our convictions and our imagination of a better world.

Each of you now enter the job market in a world unrecognizable from just a few years earlier. The multiple shocks arising from the worst health crisis the world has ever seen, the worst disruption to global trade in decades, and most seriously, the most precarious geo-political tensions since World War 2 – they have combined to create what many have called the perfect storm of global instability.

It is easy for me to repeat the cliché that every crisis contains an opportunity. But clichés are exactly that because they *do* have some truth to them, and it is for each of you to seek out, and to turn into reality, the opportunities which await you in this unprecedented time of uncertainty.

Today is particularly poignant for me because after 19 times, this will be my last Commencement. After a quarter century of an exhilarating ride, an experience that contains some of the proudest memories of my life, I turn 70 years old next month and shall soon be stepping down.

If there is a single thing I have learnt in these 25 years with SMU, it is this: a university – indeed, like a nation -- is nothing about shiny buildings or impressive degrees; it is all about the community of diverse individuals, which makes us unique. It falls upon all of us who love SMU – our alumni, our past and present faculty and staff, and you, the present and future graduands, to build and improve upon this precious community with everything we have, so that, from year to year, cohort to cohort, we continue to IMAGINE BETTER – and then achieve it.

Like each of you, I shall leave SMU with precious memories and draw upon them to help me make this a better world: in whatever I do, whomever I touch. To everyone in our SMU community – trustees, faculty, students, alumni, and many other stakeholders – thank you for this incredible journey which will never end, so long as we all believe fervently in what we do.

Once again, congratulations to all the graduates and your families today. Stay safe, take care, and be well.

Goodbye.

- End -