

EDUCATION



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No.1 authority on Asia: That is NUS' vision

By Jane Ng

THE National University of Singapore (NUS) wants to become an international university with a unique Asian flavour.

Laying out his vision for the university for the first time, NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan, 49, said he wants it to use its location and knowledge to stand out internationally and fill the gap left by other established schools.

Already one of the world's best ranked universities, NUS is well positioned to become the No.1 authority on Asia, he said, and could influence the future of the region.

Prof Tan, who became NUS president last month, was speaking at a lunch to welcome him held at the National University of Singapore Society's (NUSS) Kent Ridge Guild House yesterday.

In attendance were several hundred people, including President SR Nathan, who is also the NUS Chancellor, Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Education, students and alumni.

Kicking off his speech with an anecdote, Prof Tan described how he was too scared to cross a rickety bridge in Pakistan until he saw a local girl run across.

'Crossing the bridge was more a mental challenge than a physical one,' he said.

The university was ready to take on the 'mental challenges', despite some of them having 'daunting bridges'.

'We need boldness, self-belief and conviction to overcome obstacles and to grasp the opportunities,' he said.

One such opportunity, he said, was capitalising on NUS' expertise in the region.

'As it grows, Asia will also face great challenges,' he said. 'More research and scholarship is needed to understand critical issues within Asia and to find suitable solutions.'

'This will allow us to educate students who not only have an understanding of global issues, but also an Asian perspective and context.'

The new NUS Global-Asia Institute, to be established by next year, will focus on broad research issues that affect Asia and will look at how they are interconnected.

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Ageing, for example, has implications for health delivery systems and urban planning, as well as financial security issues like pensions, real estate prices and wage gaps, he explained.

Prof Tan also spoke about the need for NUS to prepare its students for 'a lifetime of careers'.

'It's now not uncommon for people to have 10 to 15 jobs. So we have to change from preparing students for a career for life, to a lifetime of careers,' he said.

Training needs to cover not an immediate job but also the ability to pick up new skills and do other jobs, explained Prof Tan.

The new University Town residential college due to open in 2011 is also part of NUS' plans to adapt to the future.

Over 4,000 students will attend small-group seminars and create projects together, while living on campus.

NUS will also look at the engineering and computing undergraduate programme, revamping the engineering course to have a design-focused curriculum and a multi-disciplinary approach.

Earlier yesterday, in introducing Prof Tan, Mr Wong Ngit Liong, the chairman of NUS' board of trustees, described him as a man with a 'razor sharp wit, superb memory and a knack for grasping complicated issues and summarising them in a nutshell' who was nevertheless a very modest and humble individual.

Referring to Prof Tan's artistic talents and flair for landscape painting, he said: 'As NUS' 'chief artist', today also marks the first of the new strokes you will paint to add new brilliance to NUS.'

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