

NANYANG UNIVERSITY
XVI CONVOCATION

SPEECH BY DR LEE CHIAW MENG, VICE-CHANCELLOR

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1 At the last Convocation, speaking as the Minister for Education, I raised a rather provocative question, that is: Is Nantah a national institution of higher learning or is it merely serving a sectoral interest? Exactly a year later, as the newly appointed Vice-Chancellor, I am pleased to report at this Convocation that major changes are taking place to develop Nantah into a national university to cater for students of all races from all language streams, thus realising one of the major objectives of the University when it was founded two decades ago.

2 This year, for the first time in the University's history, students of all races from all language streams have enrolled in the various faculties. Although the number of students from non-Chinese streams is relatively small, this new admission pattern marks the most significant step towards the development of Nantah as a national university. We also have, in this year, the largest batch of students from the English stream.

3 Nantah's academic programme had often been criticised as being too department-oriented. In the past, changes had been made but unfortunately these were superficial. A radical change in the academic structure has been introduced in the current academic session. Instead of being departmentally-based, students are faculty-oriented, and thus have the benefit of a more flexible and broad-based education.

4 Consequent to the structural changes, many new subjects have been introduced, including such inter-disciplinary programmes as Physical Science and Environmental Studies. More inter-disciplinary subjects will be introduced in the future.

5 This leads me to the development plan for Nantah. Since I took office in March, I have been asked time and again to reveal my plans for the long-term development of Nantah. This is obviously not possible. The development of a University is not one which can be drawn up haphazardly within a short span of time. Indeed, this had been the defect of Nantah's development plans in the past. Many developments were effected on a rather ad hoc basis, very often arising from the availability of staff in a particular discipline without careful consideration of the needs of the society.

For proper planning, it is essential that an in-depth study be made into the long-term manpower budget for the nation, the social economic development of our society in the future and, of course, for Nantah, we have also to look into the development of our sister institution, the University of Singapore.

6 In 1972, the Nanyang University Council appointed a Committee to make recommendations for the development of Nantah in the next ten years. The Committee considered three possible ways for Nantah to develop. Having considered the data available at that time, the Committee concluded that Singapore would need only one largish 'comprehensive' university and one smaller, somewhat more specialised university, a role the Committee envisaged Nantah would play. They also recommended that Nantah should think in terms of a modest rate of growth, bearing in mind an increasing need for more graduates in business administration and accountancy and, on a lesser scale, in the arts and sciences.

7 However, I think otherwise. I believe Singapore needs two good universities. With a growing population and higher standards of living, there will be greater demand for tertiary education. There will also be greater demand for graduate manpower with greater economic growth. Nantah could, and should, develop into a 'comprehensive' university without necessarily duplicating the efforts of the University of Singapore. It also has the advantage of being close to the industrial community of Jurong. Nantah can develop its own 'sphere of influence' complementing that of the University of Singapore, as equals. Indeed, Nantah can fulfill an even greater role than that envisaged by the Committee.

8 There is much controversy over the merits and demerits of a mega-university. Personally I believe, for Singapore, it is advantageous to have two small to medium-sized universities, not too dissimilar to those in the United Kingdom. A university is not a factory, the theory of economies of scale does not apply. In fact, the point of diminishing returns for a university is reached very rapidly. Beyond an enrolment of about 5000, it would be difficult to cultivate the intimate academic atmosphere so essential for learning and research. To my mind, a mammoth department is only justified when major basic research is being carried out, such as aero-space research programmes in the United States in the early sixties.

9 There are many examples of communities of the size of Singapore being served by more than one university and an example which is not dissimilar to the present relation between Nantah and the University of Singapore is that of the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. However, I would rather prefer Nantah and the University of Singapore to develop along the model of Harvard and MIT. These are perhaps two of the world's most renowned universities; both are located in the small town of Cambridge in close proximity to each other and both have a moderate undergraduate enrolment - MIT has just over 4000 while Harvard has 6000. They have grown side by side and have attained reputations of their own. Each has established its own specialities and developed its own general 'sphere of influence'. Yet a distinguishing feature in the development of the two universities is their mutual cooperation which has led to the establishment of a number of joint projects. Notable examples are the Joint Centre for Urban Studies and the University Information and Technology Cooperation. The two universities also share an electron accelerator. I see no reason why Nantah and the University of Singapore cannot develop along the same lines.

10 It is with these thoughts in mind that I am very happy to see that having gone their separate ways for the last 20 years, the two sister universities in Singapore have finally come closer together. As a start, a scheme of concurrent appointment of senior academic staff has been introduced. Common external examiners will be appointed as far as feasible. These arrangements will ensure better harmonisation and co-ordination of curriculum and academic structure and standards. An Inter-University Council will be established to stimulate even closer cooperation between the two institutions. I can say with confidence that in the coming years there will be even greater cross fertilization between the two universities at all levels. Eventually, it will be possible for students from one university to take some subjects at the other university.

11 Over the years, Nantah has created its own characteristics. In the course of its development, some of these features will undergo change. Those impeding progress will have to be discarded. We cannot be too nostalgic about all that have been associated with the past. Not all of them have impact on the academic excellence of the University. On the other hand, there are numerous characteristics typical of Nantah, which are worthy of being preserved no matter what direction the University's development may take.

For example, a very typical Eastern environment prevails within the campus: the unwritten moral code, the unchallenged behavioral values, respect for the mentor are features which should be preserved. They may have no direct or immediate impact, but over the years, through Nantah's graduates, these qualities will permeate into the moral fibre of our society in the long term cultural development of our nation.

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