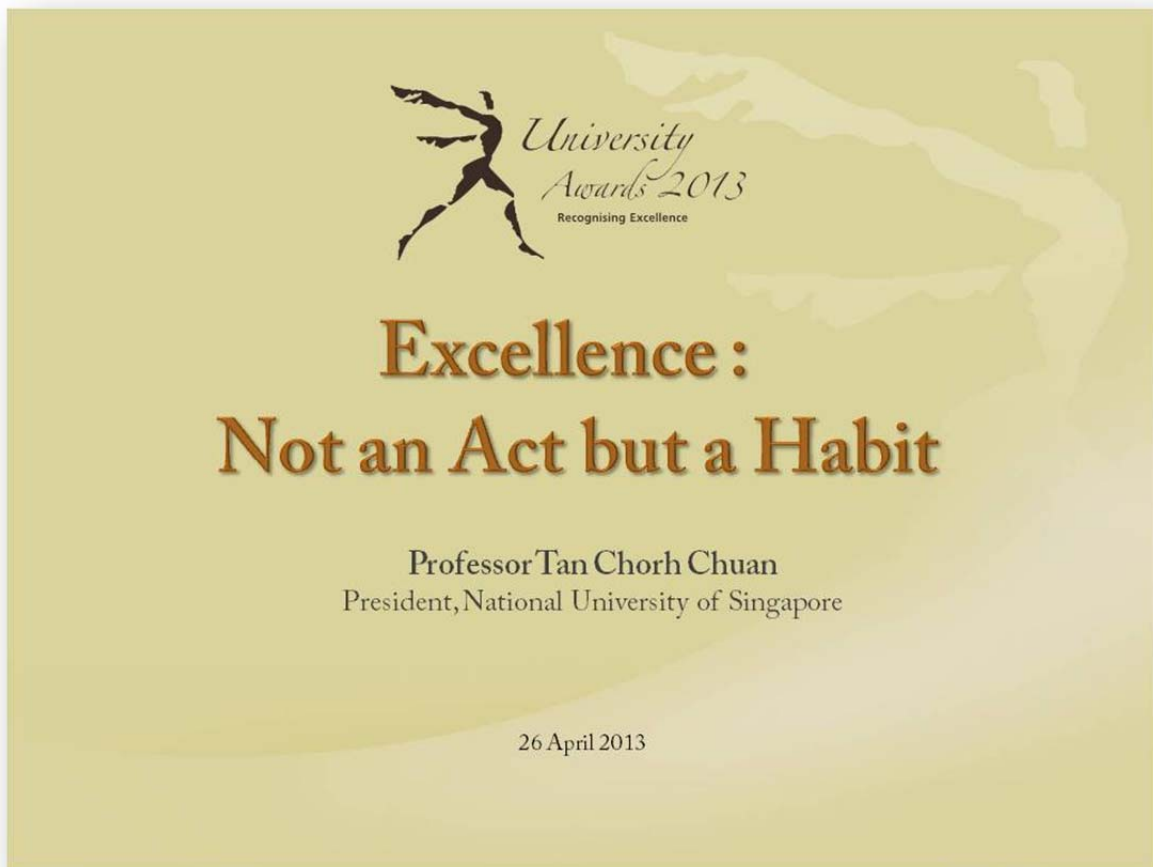


University Awards 2013

Speech by NUS President, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan,
at the University Cultural Centre, 26th April 2013

“Excellence: not an act but a habit”



NUS Pro-Chancellor Mr Po'ad Mattar and Mrs Mattar

NUS Chairman Mr Wong Ngit Liong and Mrs Wong

NUS Trustees; Award Recipients

Distinguished Guests; Colleagues, Alumni and Friends

In Goethe's great play, Faust laments:

*"Philosophy have I digested,
The whole of Law and Medicine,
From each its secrets have I wrested,
Theology, alas, thrown in.
Poor fool, with all this sweated lore,
I stand no wiser than I was before."*



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~ Faust, by Goethe

Last year, in my State of the University Address, I spoke of some powerful drivers that could potentially re-define and transform teaching and learning in the University. One of the most important of these is the massive explosion of data and its ready availability through information technology. Today, it is likely that not even Faust would be able to make the same claim of mastery over whole fields of knowledge.

Likewise, as our students wrestle with “all this sweated lore” - this massive information overload - our focus must be on helping them to learn how to ask good questions, how to think critically and imaginatively about issues, and how to apply advanced reasoning to come to useful insights and solutions. This is a challenging goal but one which all of us who teach at NUS, must embrace and contribute to.

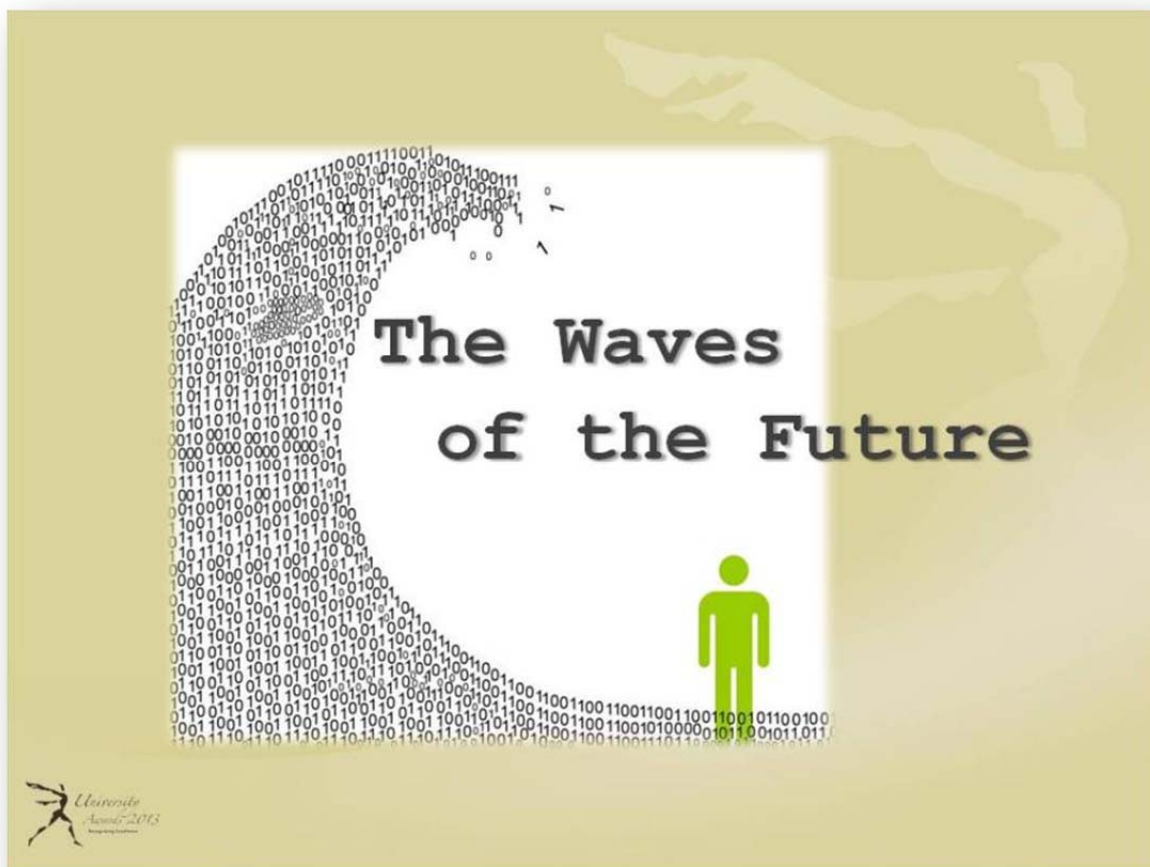
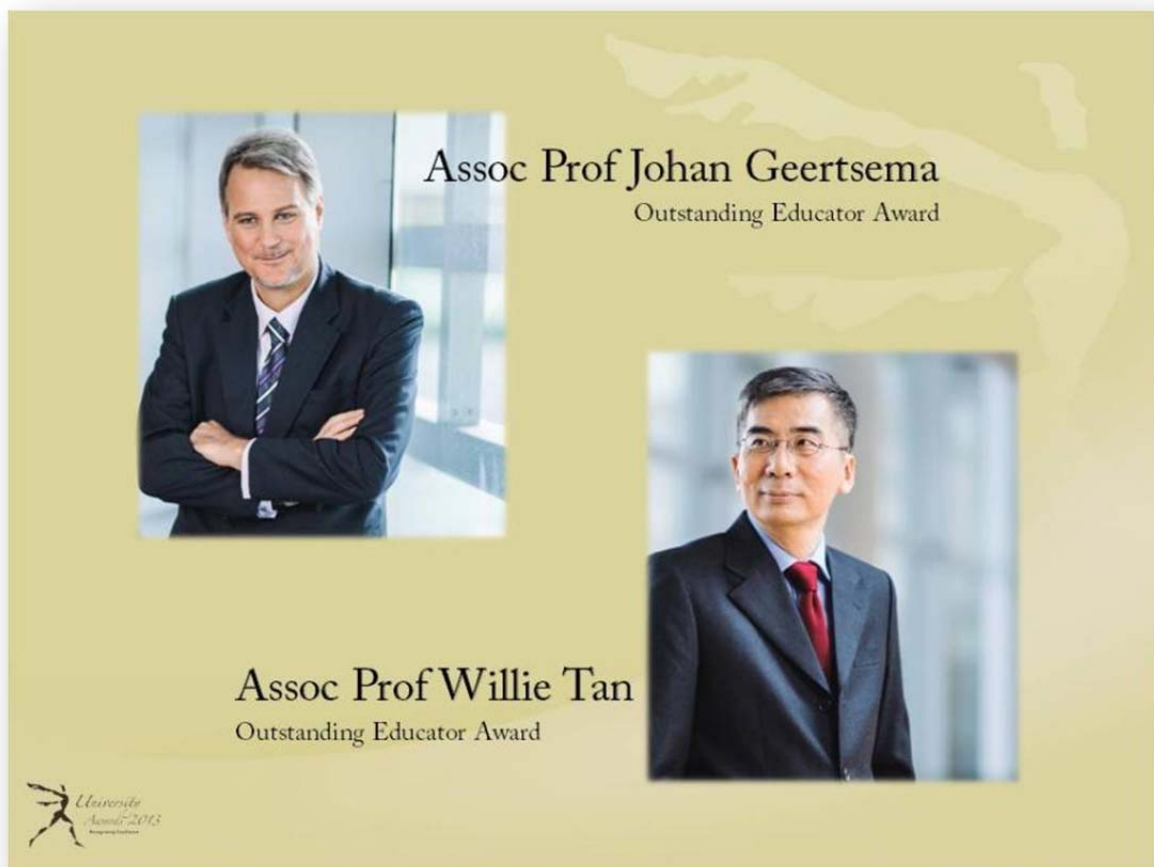


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In this, we are fortunate to have passionate and dedicated faculty who blaze the trail with their novel approaches and thoughtful innovations. Our Outstanding Educator award winners tonight demonstrate that a powerful learning experience is often best achieved when programmes offer an artful blend of critical thought and creative expression.

Associate Professor Geertsema's effective use of social media and collaborative tools on the iPad, showcase how NUS can lead the way in creatively using technology to enhance learning outcomes, to blend online learning with more engaged face-to-face learning in the classroom. Associate Professor Willie Tan integrates new perspectives and knowledge from different disciplines to ensure that his courses have a dynamic, leading-edge relevance that crosses traditional academic silos. In turn, this enables his students to appreciate the curriculum's applicability across a wider range of issues and industries.



Beyond their notable achievements, what Professors Geertsema and Willie Tan also reflect powerfully, is a “culture of excellence”.

Aristotle famously said: “Excellence is not an act but a habit”. On culture, a much more contemporary definition goes like this: “Culture is what people do when no one is looking”. Taken together, a “Culture of excellence” is a deeply rooted “habit of mind” – a strong, instinctive desire to stretch to do even better, a continual impulse to self-surpass.

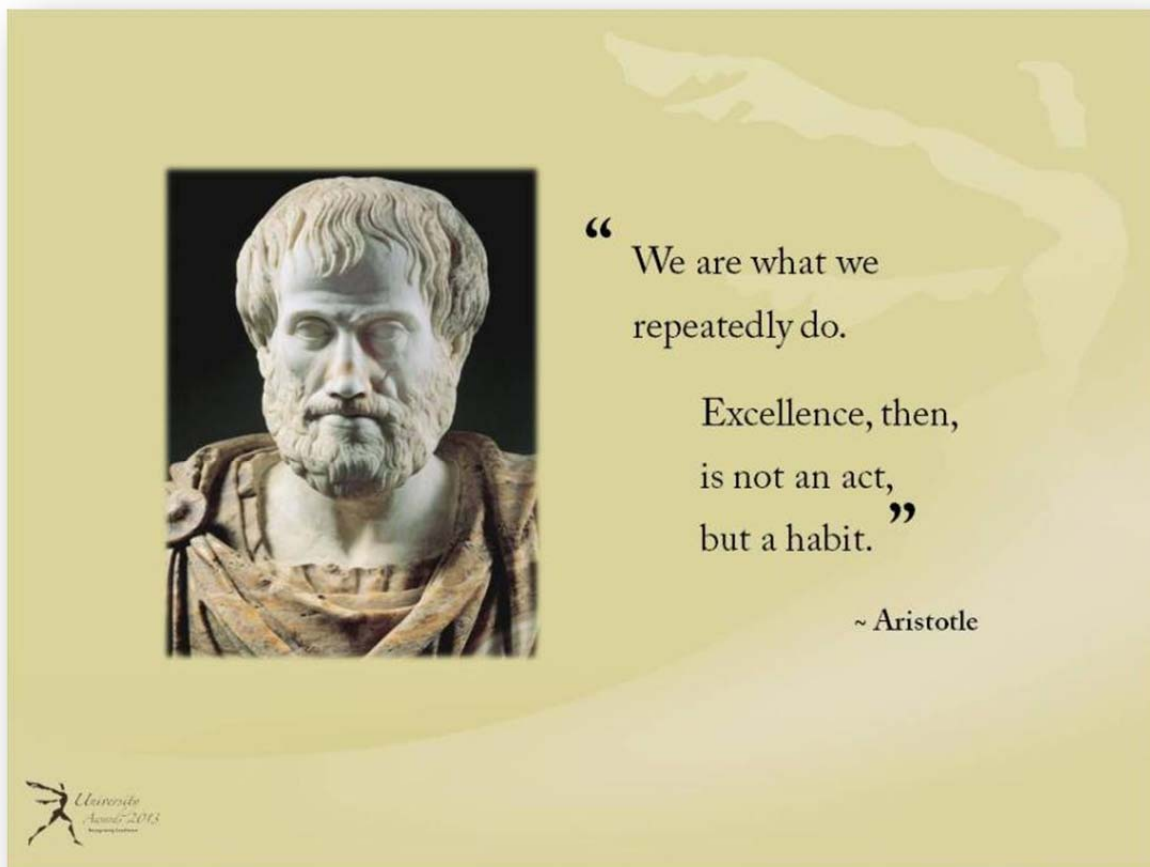


Image source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aristotle_Altemps_Inv8575.jpg

At NUS, we have been working hard to foster and embed this “habit of mind” in education, research and service, and in every member of our NUS community.

A culture of excellence is not the culmination of all that we do or achieve; rather, it is a powerful internal wellspring that motivates and energizes our actions and behaviours as

we relentlessly seek new peaks of distinction. I believe that this culture of excellence is taking root and gaining strength in all parts of our university.

The Research Award recipients tonight illustrate this point beautifully.

Our Outstanding Researcher and Young Researcher award winners have made remarkable achievements: Professor Ooi Beng Chin from Computer Science is among the most highly regarded researchers in the database arena in the world; Associate Professor Liu Bin has excelled in polymer chemistry where she has achieved several “first-in-the-world” discoveries; and Dr Barbaros Özyilmaz has done exciting, ground-breaking work on grapheme, a field in which he is a true pioneer.



Although the nature of their research is very different, our Award winners show a common passion to tirelessly pursue the frontiers of knowledge, and to apply their discoveries in imaginative and exciting new ways.

Like them, Emeritus Professor Ling Eng Ang is regarded as a leading authority on microglia, and has helped establish neuroscience research in Singapore. We thank him deeply for serving NUS with such distinction and humility, for over four decades, and particularly for his pivotal role in raising the global standing of our Department of Anatomy.



We are indeed proud of our Award recipients and Emeritus Professor Ling.

They and their research teams and collaborators truly embody the NUS “culture of excellence”. This same spirit of excellence, when conjoined with a dedication and passion to serve the wider community, can result in substantial advances that lift society.

This evening, we also celebrate the work and achievements of two outstanding individuals who have made amazing contributions driven by a mindset of excellence.

Our Outstanding Service Award recipients, Mr Ng Yat Chung and Professor John Wong, are exceptional individuals. They have not only risen to the apex of their professions, but are also imbued with a deep sense of duty and service to the community.



Mr Ng Yat Chung is an accomplished leader who truly understands the difficult process of leading fundamental change. As Chief of Defence Force, he played a key role in the SAF's transformation into a third-generation fighting force capable of a complex spectrum of operations, and as NOL's CEO, he is helping to guide the shipping line to meet the exacting demands of intense global competition. In each instance, he provided

the vision and strategic directions needed to drive the organisation to become more nimble, more focused, and enhanced with new and greater capabilities.

NUS benefited greatly from his keen eye and steady hand as Chair of the NUS Campus Planning and Development Committee, as we implemented our incredibly complex building programme. This has transformed teaching and research on campus and is providing rich and unparalleled residential and cultural opportunities for our students and staff.



In a similar way but in a different set of fields, Prof John Wong has made a huge difference to NUS, Singapore and the global biomedical science community. His many stellar contributions are well known, but what is particularly impressive about Prof Wong is his strong conviction about doing good and doing well, his incredible energy and his

infectious passion. He brings all these to bear, regardless of whether he is tending to an ill patient in the middle of the night, revamping the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine's curriculum, or bringing cancer medicine in Singapore to a high international level. The hallmark of Prof John Wong, however, is his profound sense of responsibility. He sets extremely high goals and standards for himself, and yet, he has been able to achieve these and more.

Although he has done so much, Professor Wong, like Mr Ng, stands out for his modesty, civility and empathy. NUS is indeed fortunate to have such leaders of distinction in our midst.

The achievements and contributions of our Award recipients this evening speak not only of their abilities, but more importantly, of their character and attitude. They come from different disciplines and backgrounds but they share one thing in common: they are never satisfied with the status quo. Hence, they are constantly striving to do better.

They are driven by the pursuit of excellence - excellence based on habits of mind that embrace rigour, collaboration, perseverance and imagination. These are the same qualities that should inspire the entire NUS community, providing the vital impulse that will impel us forward, and in the process, making NUS a university we can all be justly proud of.

My congratulations to all our award winners! Thank you.