

Professor Burn,

It's an old joke, but one that has a kernel of truth in it. An optimist looks at a glass and says, "this glass is half full"; a pessimist looks at a glass and says, "it is half empty"; an *engineer* looks at the glass and says, "this glass could be 50% smaller, lighter and cheaper!"

Michael Chia is an engineer, as well as a business leader of great distinction. Over a 40-year career he has combined business acumen with an engineer's creativity and flair for managing complex systems whether technical or commercial, and of course the ability to optimise solutions. More than this, Michael is a *Newcastle* Engineer – one who has been a steadfast friend and supporter of higher education in Singapore, and of our university as it has grown there.

In 1971, the young Michael won a Colombo Scholarship to study Marine Engineering with us. Stepping into Newcastle University in the seventies must have been exciting and a little unnerving. It wasn't only the weather and the dialect that were different! This was the beginning of a decade of profound change in both the UK and Singapore. Newcastle's economy was diversifying away from its concentration on traditional industries while Singapore was experiencing intense industrialisation in the most rapidly growing of the "Asian Tiger" economies. By the time Michael graduated with First Class Honours in 1974, advances in Marine Engineering were starting to come thick and fast in areas such as submersible and remotely operated vehicles, dynamic ship positioning, and marine geotechnics.

His early career involved work as a hull engineer and managing projects in ship repair and conversion in local shipyards. In 1980, he joined Keppel FELS, starting as an assistant shipyard manager responsible for planning and development. He went on to hold appointments in Corporate Planning, Marketing, and Commercial and General Manager Operations. His focus was on offshore and marine systems, particularly drilling rigs and production units, vessels for Liquefied Natural Gas, power barges and specialized ships. In the 1980s, he served with the Keppel Group in China and Hong Kong, establishing himself as a significant figure in the maritime industry. Two decades after he graduated from Newcastle, he was coordinating 1800 subcontractors and about a thousand staff, every day, no doubt, using those engineering virtues of creativity and optimisation.

Michael rose to occupy many senior roles, including periods as Executive Director of Keppel FELS, CEO and Deputy Chairman of Keppel Integrated Engineering Ltd., and Director of

Group Strategy and Development of Keppel Corporation. Among many professional distinctions, he is a Fellow of the Royal Institution of Naval Architects in the UK of the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers in Singapore, and of the Singapore Institute of Arbitrators. In addition to his Newcastle degree, he holds an MBA and Graduate Certificate in International Arbitration from the National University of Singapore.

Michael's career is marked by a commitment to developing and promoting Singapore as an international maritime centre, and – by engaging with higher education – encouraging talented people to enter the industry to which he has devoted so much of his life. He has served as the President of the Association of Singapore Maritime Industries, a member of the Ngee Ann Polytechnic Council, and as a board member and Chair of the Singapore Maritime Foundation from 2005 to 2015.

The Foundation aims to raise the profile and stature of the marine sector. At one point, this had even included the Foundation supporting a star-studded TV drama series set in the offshore construction industry! But, perhaps more traditionally, and maybe thinking of the scholarship that brought him first to Newcastle, Michael led the foundation through significant growth in its own scholarship scheme, and in promoting Singapore internationally. By the time he stepped down as chairman, the Sea Asia conference was engaging with as many as 18,000 participants from 85 countries, testament to the extent to which Singapore had grown to be the global hub for innovation in this critical industry.

It is then not too surprising that Michael, as a proud Newcastle graduate, was eager to engage with his old university as we began to build our presence in the Lion City. He been a friend of the university and an active Board member from the earliest days and was appointed to the Boards of Newcastle University in Singapore in 2016, and our Research and Innovation Institute in 2017.

Two of our former Deans and CEOs who worked with Michael – Professors Ian Postlethwaite and Matt Bentley – have told me how much they counted on him. Ian tells me that his calm approach and wealth of experience were invaluable. Matt recalls his great support for our academic colleagues in the early stages of their careers, and his input to the development of our degree programmes and short courses, where his stature and contacts in the industry helped us to find the right contributors. Sometimes he has been a diplomat too – as he has helped us to develop the relationship that we enjoy with the Singapore Institute of Technology. In this role, he possesses some essential personal features. Matt describes him as

Michael Chia, DCL, Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2024

“well liked with a great sense of humour.” Another colleague told me, “I wouldn’t say he was very serious, but I always thought he could be if necessary!”

The beneficiaries of Michael’s contributions to the university are, of course, not deans or CEOs, but the thousands of Newcastle students here and in Singapore who have, like Michael, had careers and lives opened by the experience of higher education. Although Newcastle, Singapore and the marine industries have changed profoundly since young Michael Chia stepped into our university in the 1970s, that value has remained resolutely unchanged.

Professor Burn, Michael has shown us what an engineer can achieve in turning their talents to the benefit of industry, business, and society. In recognition of his contributions to the development of maritime industries, his commitment to higher education, and his steadfast support for our university, I invite you to admit Michael Chia to the degree of Doctor of Civil Law *honoris causa*.

Professor D Wong (Provost and CEO (ASEAN))

Professor J S Fitzgerald (Senior Public Orator)

14<sup>th</sup> July 2024