

CHOO CHIAU BENG DCL

Mr Vice-Chancellor,

“Carrying coals to Newcastle” is an activity long derided as futile; but were someone to have sold coals to Newcastle, they’d have been admired for their business acumen. In these days in which the Port of Tyne does indeed import coals, we need a better phrase to denote the skills of a first-class entrepreneur; so we might say they could “sell sand to Saudi Arabia”. Had he chosen to do so, I am sure that Mr Choo Chiau Beng would by now have been a major supplier of sand to the Arabian Peninsula, even though he comes from a tropical land with no deserts. Instead he chose to display the same business acumen in the field of marine and offshore technology.

It is said that if you stand on your tiptoes on the tallest building in Singapore, you can just see the Equator on the southern horizon – which is particularly impressive given that the Equator is an imaginary line! However, no one claims to be able to see the far-distant Arctic Circle. Yet despite being located about as far from the frozen seas as it’s possible to be, the Singaporean company Keppel Offshore and Marine, under the leadership of Choo Chiau Beng, has now become a leading supplier of ice-breaking ships to Arctic Russia. It is, I suppose, only fair that a country blessed with a tropical climate should be found wanting in some other respect; and thus it is that there are no significant deposits of oil or natural gas in Singaporean territory. Despite this, Chiau Beng has succeeded in

positioning Keppel Offshore and Marine as the world's leading supplier of the jack-up rigs which are used by the oil and gas industry worldwide for offshore drilling. The company boasts an amazing sixty percent of the global market share for this type of rig, and has also cornered more than a third of the global market for the floating rigs used in deeper waters.

Mr Lim Chee Onn, the non-Executive Chairman of the parent company Keppel Corporation Ltd, unhesitatingly attributes these two accomplishments to Chiau Beng's vision, motivational leadership, lateral-thinking ability and technical expertise. This expertise was first formed right here in Newcastle University, where Chiau Beng read Naval Architecture on a scholarship funded by the "Colombo Plan" – an alliance of twenty-five countries in the Asia-Pacific Region that aims to promote socio-economic development by nurturing the knowledge and skills of their citizens. Graduating in 1970 with a First Class Honours degree, Chiau Beng stayed on to complete his MSc in Naval Architecture the following year. Those four most formative of years not only paved the way for Chiau Beng's future professional success: it was here that he met Eileen, also from Singapore, who was studying medicine. They married soon after and set up home back in Singapore, where their son Daniel was born a few years later. Choo Chiau Beng is described by his close friends as a great family man: dedicated, loyal and deeply content. Dedication, loyalty and contentment also characterise his working life.

Chiau Beng's Newcastle University qualifications were his passport into his first job with Keppel, as a management trainee in a ship repair yard. His flair and drive were soon recognised by his managers, who in 1982 despatched him to Harvard to undertake a management development programme. After completing that programme with flying colours, Chiau Beng returned to Singapore and contributed tirelessly to the expansion and diversification of Keppel, which soon became a company of global dimensions – which is to say, of dimensions commensurate with the professional stature of Chiau Beng himself. Keppel Corporation is now firmly established as one of the world's leading players in marine and offshore construction, with thousands of employees in thirty-four countries worldwide, who currently generate a profit of about one billion Singaporean dollars on an annual turnover of more than ten billion. The ethos of Keppel is as important as its balance-sheet: it has excellent credentials in employee welfare, environmental responsibility, customer service, financial transparency and innovation strategy. Keppel Corporation has diversified over the years, and now has major subsidiaries active in property, the development of sustainable urban infrastructure and investments in oil refining. Yet it remains best known for its traditional activities in marine and offshore construction, which is precisely the field in which Choo Chiau Beng has provided leadership, right up to the first of January this year, when he became Chief Executive of Keppel Corporation Ltd.

Chiau Beng's code of loyalty is manifest in his career, his family life and amongst his friends; to this day, he still socialises with pals he has known since childhood, regularly golfing with them on weekends. Choo Chiau Beng the golfer has a reputation as a hard-driver who never flinches from the long shot – a description which could just as easily refer to his professional activities. Although the stakes on the golf course are never greater than who will end up buying lunch, Chiau Beng approaches the challenge with the same spirit of intensely competitive fair play which made him so effective at the helm of Keppel Offshore and Marine.

Chiau Beng's loyalty is also manifest in his dedication to his alma mater, Newcastle University. Reflecting his influence, Keppel employs many Newcastle graduates. Chiau Beng was also instrumental in the establishment of the Singaporean delivery platform for our MSc in Marine Technology. This has since led to the establishment of our satellite campus there, which is now recruiting eighty undergraduates annually to marine technology. Keppel Corporation is also drawing on the expertise of some of Newcastle University's leading environmental researchers in developing their corporate sustainability policies.

Mr Vice-Chancellor, Choo Chiau Beng epitomises the value of a Newcastle University education. From humble beginnings he has risen to the status of a global icon in the marine and offshore sector. His competitive prowess is tempered with the finest of human values. As a token of our respect, and as a celebration of our pride by

association with him, I now request that you confer upon Choo Chiau Beng the Degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger