Growing up on his grandparents’ farm in Sjobacka, Sweden, NTU President Professor Bertil Andersson was often rebuked by his parents for reading instead of helping his grandfather pick apples. But apples were low-hanging fruit, and the young Prof Andersson had bigger ambitions.

With the backing of his grandmother, he dedicated himself to his studies, heading for Umeå University when he turned 21. There, he completed his bachelor’s and master’s degrees, before proceeding to Lund University to obtain his PhD and Doctor of Science degrees. Over the years, Prof Andersson established himself as an authority in plant biochemistry.

Beyond research, Prof Andersson also applied his keen intellect to the administration of academia. He eventually assumed the roles of Chairman of the Nobel Committee for Chemistry (1997), President of Linköping University, Sweden (1999–2003), and Chief Executive of the European Science Foundation (2004–2007), before being appointed as NTU’s first Provost in 2007. He was installed as NTU’s third President in July 2011, taking over the reins from Professor Su Guaning.

In this special feature, we speak to Prof Andersson about his proudest achievements in NTU, the importance of the alumni network, and his aspirations for the young university.

How would you describe your overall experience at NTU?

It was a big decision, back in 2007, to become Provost and then President of this University, and the experience of almost 11 years has been more fantastic than I had expected it to be. It has not been just another job. Rather, it was a holistic experience, learning a new culture, adjusting to new ways of thinking, being part of this jump in academic performance and working with people from across Asia. It is an experience that I will carry with me into the future.

What are you most proud of as President of NTU?

I am most proud of the transformation and holistic change of the entire university. Today, we are not just a research-intensive institution, but we have transformed education, widened our academic portfolio and constructed new buildings.

I’ve also always said that there are three factors to NTU’s success, and they are: people, people, people. So, I am very proud of all the people we have recruited, especially the...
young investigators—they comprise 5 percent of NTU’s faculty but contribute almost 40 percent of all our Nature and Science papers.

Of course, another thing that I am proud of is the fact that we are the top university in Asia and the 11th university in the world, according to the Quacquarelli Symonds ranking systems. In my international travels and interactions with businesses and companies, I have learnt that one should not underestimate what these high benchmarks mean for NTU and Singapore.

You have been the driving force behind the holistic transformation of NTU as an institute of higher learning. What made these sweeping changes possible in such a short time?

The money that Singapore allocated to research has been very instrumental, but I think we spent that money very wisely and strategically. This was especially true for balancing political and academic initiatives.

The Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, for example, was entirely a political initiative. It was established simply because Singapore needed more doctors. After convincing the government that NTU could do it, we needed to develop the concept, including getting Imperial College London as a partner, which was a year-long process that required tremendous effort. But now, we have top students, a completely new pedagogical model, and state-of-the-art buildings and labs for experimental medicine and clinical sciences, so our efforts have paid off.

In contrast, the Asian School of the Environment was more of an academic initiative, filling an obvious gap in the environmental sciences at NTU. Because we pursued it, we now have a holistic, high-level research approach to the environment, and the campus is now being used as a green test bed.

How has the NTU alumni network grown during your presidency and why is this important?

It has basically doubled! There are more than 223,000 alumni today, as compared to just over 100,000 when I first joined NTU. We have 48 overseas alumni associations and we’ve recently established the first Alumni Circle in Oslo.

It’s truly a global enterprise, and I think we lose perspective of how important this is. In the US, alumni networks are a big thing—you have donors providing scholarships for students. But a university has to come of age before it is able to rally donors, and we haven’t come to that stage yet at NTU.

Even so, the alumni are very important. For example, we have about 25,500 alumni in China, some of whom are high-ranking government officials, who came here to study public administration. Many of them are passionate about NTU.

But it’s not just about the numbers, it’s about a connection to the countries where these alumni reside in. In Finland, we may only have ten alumni, but still, ten ambassadors for NTU in Finland is significant, and I think we should not count in numbers for such countries.

What are your aspirations for NTU as you hand over the presidency?

I hope that NTU will be a place conducive to creative and intellectual discourse. I also hope NTU will stay be the number one university in Asia; maybe, it could even be among the top five or six universities worldwide.

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