Southeast Asia is on the precipice of change. Steering the region’s transformation is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an intergovernmental organisation comprising ten member states. This year, Singapore will take on ASEAN’s chairmanship and host delegates for the fourth time since the organisation’s founding in 1967.

On 18 June 2018, more than 100 NTU alumni and guests gathered at the NTU Alumni House at Marina Square to hear Mr Ong Keng Yong, Ambassador-at-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore, share his thoughts on ASEAN’s role in promoting regional cooperation. Mr Ong is also the former Secretary-General of ASEAN and current Executive Deputy Chairman of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Since its inception, ASEAN has played a fundamental role as a mediator of regional affairs, from the Rohingya refugee crisis in Myanmar to territorial disputes in the South China Sea. By anchoring the solidarity of member states, ASEAN has increased the prosperity of countries in the region. “[ASEAN member states] are doing very well in terms of the economy, better than many other countries in Europe, Africa and Latin America,” said Mr Ong. “The whole region is growing.”

Despite the optimistic outlook, Mr Ong warned of a more sobering issue looming over the region—the digital divide. Digital infrastructure for essential services such as banking is still lacking in many countries in Southeast Asia, he said. “For example, in Indonesia, six to seven out of ten Indonesians still do not have a bank account.”

Additionally, education systems in the region have been relatively slow to adapt to the rapid pace of digitalisation, said Mr Ong. Graduates of these systems are unable to find jobs, not because they are not educated, but because they lack the relevant skillsets that are sought after by employers who increasingly operate in a digital space.

**Stepping Up to the Challenges**

Acknowledging that the digital divide poses a significant challenge when it comes to uniting countries in Southeast Asia, Mr Ong highlighted some of Singapore’s efforts to overcome this problem. For instance, Singapore sets up training centres around the region, in places like Hanoi, Vietnam; Vientiane, Laos; and Yangon, Myanmar. “If you don’t do this, the digital economy around the region may not grow as fast,” he explained, emphasising that the digital economy is crucial to attracting investors, which in turn will stimulate the region’s growth.

Mr Ong also took the opportunity to share some of ASEAN’s goals for the upcoming year, which include promoting seamless trade, deepening the integration of services and preserving ASEAN centrality. “ASEAN centrality means that we all work together as a team... to address key issues such as technology, education, environment, urbanisation and partnership in the region.”

NTU alumni found the session enriching and insightful. “I think this session was a very good opportunity to learn from the ambassador’s many years of experience in dealing with the delicate issues in the region,” said Mr Fong Wai Sun (NBS/1997). “It also helps us regular Singaporeans understand what the various tensions and intricacies are with regards to foreign relations.”

“ASEAN centrality means that we all work together as a team to address key issues such as technology, education, environment, urbanisation and partnership in the region.”

**OF BRIGHT FUTURES AND CLOUDS ON THE HORIZON**

Anticipating the future, the session concluded on a high note. “As the Chair of ASEAN for the year 2018, Singapore will be looking to build momentum for the region and bring ASEAN centrality to the fore.”

Mr Ong emphasised the importance of working together to solve pressing regional issues.