



Professor Tan Eng Chye is widely acknowledged as being behind NUS' transformation into a world-class university, and the chief architect of the university's pioneering educational and academic programmes. The 55-year-old will take over as NUS president on Jan 1. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

# NUS provost to be its next president

Varsity says he is a home-grown leader who is a powerful advocate for global education

**Sandra Davie**  
Senior Education  
Correspondent

National University of Singapore (NUS) provost Tan Eng Chye, who led the implementation of a number of groundbreaking initiatives, including the University Town residential college programme, was yesterday named the 23rd president of the university.

The mathematician, who is an NUS alumnus and who has been the provost for the past 10 years, will succeed current president Tan Chorh Chuan on Jan 1.

NUS said Professor Tan, 55, who holds a PhD and Master of Science in Mathematics from Yale University, is widely acknowledged as being behind the transformation of NUS into a world-class university, and the chief architect of the university's pioneering educational and academic programmes.

As deputy president (academic affairs) and provost since March 2007, he led the thrust towards technology-enhanced learning and a comprehensive programme to prepare NUS undergraduates to be career-ready.

Describing him as "a home-grown leader" who has been with NUS for 32 years, the university said he is a powerful advocate for global education.

Under his leadership, the proportion of NUS undergraduates who have had overseas educational experience increased to more than

80 per cent. He also underscored the importance of a broad-based education that promotes exploration, curiosity and critical thinking through a comprehensive revamp of the NUS general education curriculum, and by leading the introduction of the grade-free scheme for freshmen.

Prof Tan, who said he was deeply honoured to be tapped for the top position, praised the current president for having affirmed NUS' position as a leading global university.

In order to continue to be among the world's great universities, NUS must continue to innovate, he said.

NUS chairman Hsieh Fu Hua, who chaired the search for the new president, said the incoming president was a "deeply respected academic and a steadfast, open and decisive leader who has a strong passion for NUS".

"Eng Chye has a wide following

based on the trust he engenders, and his exceptional ability to inspire people to work together," he said.

NUS also announced the appointment of Professor Ho Teck Hua, 56, as its new senior deputy president and provost from next year.

Prof Ho is among the world's scientific elite that Singapore had been trying for years to entice back to the country.

Two years ago, the behavioural scientist was persuaded to give up his chaired professorship at the University of California, Berkeley to take up the position at NUS of deputy president of research and technology.

He currently heads two national research and development programmes in artificial intelligence and data science.

Prof Tan and Prof Ho – who were hostel mates back in their university days and dub themselves the "Tan-Ho partnership" – plan to make learning in the university more inclusive and flexible, such as by introducing aptitude-based admission and opening up classes for Singaporean members of the public.

Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung said in a Facebook post: "With both at the helm, NUS is in excellent hands."

sandra@sph.com.sg

## NUS eyes more aptitude-based admissions

To win a place on the increasingly popular computer science degree course at the National University of Singapore (NUS), students need at least two As for their A levels. Next year though, students eyeing a computing degree can be admitted through another route.

They can take up a five-month-long computer programming course at NUS and if they do well, gain fast-track admission into the degree course, even though they may fall short of the required grades.

NUS provost Tan Eng Chye, who was yesterday named the president-designate for the university, said it is looking at admitting more students by assessing their aptitude for a field of study.

Currently, only about 12 per cent of the 7,000 freshmen – in courses such as medicine, law and architecture – are assessed on their aptitude for a course, through interviews, portfolios and entrance tests.

The majority of them are admitted based on their A-level, International Baccalaureate or polytechnic diploma exam results.

Professor Tan, who has served for 10 years as NUS' provost, is known for introducing bold changes over the years, including allowing students to write off their grades for up to eight modules in the first year.

The aim is to reduce academic stress and encourage students to explore subjects outside their specialisation, including areas they are less confident in. The scheme has proven to be a hit with its first-year students, with more than 80 per cent taking up the option to drop their grade for at least one module.

Prof Tan said yesterday that NUS is also looking at allowing flexibility for students to take a gap year, or even two, during their four years of study.

He said: "A student may want to break up the undergraduate degree into two parts – he or she may study for two years, perhaps go out to work for two years and come back after that to complete the degree. We are looking at how we can allow this flexibility."

As part of efforts to promote lifelong learning, Prof Tan also announced that the university will be opening up 5,000 places per year for the next five years to NUS alumni and all Singaporeans to take up courses at NUS. This is an expansion of the plan announced in May that 140 courses across eight schools and faculties would be opened to NUS alumni over the next three years. NUS alumni can take up to two courses for free.

Those courses have been "heavily oversubscribed", revealed Prof Tan, who said that there were more than 8,000 applicants for the 400 places which were made available in areas such as literature, financial risk management, human-computer interaction and stem-cell biology.

He said: "We want to go beyond NUS alumni to make these courses available to the whole of Singapore. Giving access to its education is one of the key roles of a national university."

He stressed that with global and technological advancements, higher education is set to change.

"Five, 10 years from now, learning will be very different," he said, adding that NUS hopes to be at the forefront of this learning revolution.

Sandra Davie

**Students eyeing a computing degree can take up a five-month-long computer programming course at NUS and if they do well, gain fast-track admission into the degree course, even though they may fall short of the required grades.**