

S'pore scientist leaves Berkeley to join NUS

Noted behavioural scientist at top US college to head research at local uni

Kash Cheong

A prominent Singaporean scientist is giving up a permanent spot at a top American university to take charge of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) research efforts.

Professor Ho Teck Hua, 53, a chaired professor with tenure at the University of California, Berkeley, will return to Singapore and join

NUS full-time as deputy president of research and technology in June.

He takes over from Professor Barry Halliwell, who has held the post for nine years.

In his new position, Prof Ho will oversee everything concerning the university's research, including getting and giving out grants, policing ethics and ensuring research safety.

"It was a difficult decision," said Prof Ho, of the move. He has lived with his family in San Francisco in the United States for more than two decades.

"But I believe that NUS will achieve greater heights under the current leadership, so I am very excited to join the leadership team,

and also to serve Singapore," he added.

Things have come full circle for the behavioural scientist who began his academic career at NUS in 1988.

He went on to complete his doctorate in decision sciences at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and remained in the US.

But at the back of his mind, there were always thoughts of Singapore.

"I do miss home. I miss my parents and siblings, my friends and, of course, Singaporean food," said Prof Ho, who is married to homemaker Low Ling Ling and has two children aged 21 and 26.

He is among the scientific elite that the Republic is actively trying to entice back to Singapore after carving out successful careers abroad – a group considered to be critical to helping Singapore make research headway because such experts can mentor local talent and help forge foreign partnerships.

The National Research Foundation's Returning Singaporean Scientists Scheme, for instance, which began in 2013, aims to attract about 10 scientists home, with the help of sizeable research grants.

Prof Ho, for one, was awarded a grant for a proposal to solve societal challenges using big data. In



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one project, he will look at data from a local hospital to see how it can reduce patient waiting times and lessen the chances of a patient

being re-admitted within 48 hours. In another project, he will examine data from a local taxi company to see how the accident rate can be reduced.

The behavioural scientist, who now has a part-time appointment at NUS as the vice-president for research strategy, said that his vision of the university's research strategy was that it would continue to develop new peaks of excellence, particularly in areas that cut across disciplines, and are likely to have a big impact in Singapore and the region.

"Excellent research creates knowledge and transforms lives," he said.

Added NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan: "Teck Hua is a world-class researcher who sets very high standards for research, and is passionate about how it can improve the lives of Singaporeans and the communities around us.

"I am confident that his leadership will help bring the National University of Singapore's research and its translation to the next level of excellence."

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