

Three top Singaporean scientists coming home



Prof Lim (left) will head the department of industrial and systems engineering at the NUS engineering faculty. Dr Thean (above) joins NUS as a professor of electrical engineering in May. Prof Chua (right) will continue in his roles at Temasek Life Sciences Laboratory here.
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PHOTOS: COURTESY OF AARON THEAN AND CHUA NAM HAI



They will take up leadership positions under a scheme that gives generous grants

Carolyn Khew

Three prominent Singaporean scientists who built illustrious careers overseas are returning to continue their research here, joining the first recipient of a scheme which gives generous grants to those willing to take on leadership positions locally. Giants in their fields of computer science, advanced electronics and plant molecular biology, they have been wooed home under the prestigious Returning Singaporean Scientists Scheme announced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2013.

Professor Andrew Lim, Dr Aaron Thean and Professor Chua Nam Hai join Professor Ho Teck Hua, deputy president (research and technology) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Before the trio, Prof Ho was the only recipient under the scheme.

From today, Prof Lim, a computer scientist behind five successful companies, will head the department of industrial and systems engineering at the NUS engineering faculty, while Dr Thean, an engineer and prolific inventor with 50 patents, joins NUS as a professor of electrical engineering in May.

Prof Chua, a world-renowned biotechnology expert who has been based in New York since 1971, will continue in his roles at Temasek Life Sciences Laboratory (TLL) in Singapore – as deputy chairman of its management board and chairman of its research strategy committee.

“The three returning scientists developed their research careers over a long period of time, starting at a time when the research and development landscape in Singapore was less developed,” said National Research Foundation (NRF) chief Low Teck Seng.

“By uprooting themselves from their established careers to return to Singapore, it shows their recognition that Singapore has become a major R&D (research and development) hub.”

The target is to attract a total of 10 scientists to come back by 2019, said Professor Low. So far, the NRF has engaged over 20 scientists based overseas working in areas such as computer science, health and biomedical sciences. Only Singaporean scientists of the highest calibre qualify, Prof Low stressed.

To sweeten the deal, the NRF offers up to \$7.5 million in research start-up grants for each scientist to continue his R&D work here, an enticement that comes at a time when private firms in Singapore are spending less on research, and research overseas is feeling the crunch.

But the recipients said the grant money, while generous, was not the main pull factor.

Prof Lim, 49, who left Singapore for Hong Kong and Jiangsu, China, 12 years ago because the computer science industry here was still in its infancy, said: “The money makes it easier, but even if another country were to offer the same amount, I wouldn’t consider it. Singapore is home... My family, relatives and friends are here, and it is one of the best countries to live in.”

Dr Thean was also thinking about coming home to look after his parents, who are in their 70s. “My dad and my mum have missed me and my family quite a bit, so I would like to spend more time with them,” said the 44-year-old, who is currently with Imec, a nanoelectronic research institute based in Belgium.

Both are also looking forward to contributing to Singapore’s smart nation efforts. Prof Lim, for instance, will be part of the NUS smart nation research cluster, an inter-disciplinary group that will look into areas such as data science and cyber security.

Prof Chua, 71, is also looking forward to coming back.

“Going forward, I will have more time to interact with younger principal investigators in TLL and provide mentorship if needed,” he said.

Prof Ho, a behavioural sciences expert who took up his NUS position last June and is also Tan Chin Tuan Centennial Professor at the university, said one of his most meaningful tasks so far has been to create the new smart nation research cluster, which will involve more than 50 researchers from multiple disciplines.

And while top foreign scientists attracted here have been called “whales”, their Singaporean counterparts could be seen as “lions”, said Prof Ho. “They personify the courage of scientists to blaze new trails in science and technology in the Lion City.”

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