



NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan, who will step down on Jan 1 next year, said he will miss interacting with students and staff, and being "immersed in the full breadth of what's happening in the university". PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

NUS 'always looking for new ways of learning, teaching'

Challenge is to prepare students for changing nature of work: Don

Amelia Teng

Whenever there are leftovers at buffet receptions at the National University of Singapore (NUS) campus, students are activated through a Telegram chat group to finish the food.

This "buffet response team", an informal group set up by NUS undergraduates, is an example of how students are thinking out of the box, said its president Tan Chorh Chuan.

He said: "(This is) quite creative thinking. You're matching excess food with a group of people who wouldn't mind having a meal, and in the process reducing wastage."

Students today are bolder, dare to dream and do things differently, and "this gives a great deal of optimism for the future", said Professor Tan in an interview last week.

Likewise, NUS is constantly looking for new ways of learning and teaching, despite being Singapore's oldest university, he noted. These include opening University Town (UTown), home to Singapore's first residential colleges, partnering universities in the United States to create new models of learning, and setting up overseas launch pads for budding entrepreneurs.

Constant innovation has enabled NUS to still attract the majority of high-potential students here despite greater local and regional competition, he added.

Prof Tan, 58, a kidney specialist, will be handing over the baton to NUS provost Tan Eng Chye on Jan 1 next year.

He will head to the Ministry of Health to be its chief health scientist and executive director of its new Office for Healthcare Transformation, which looks at issues in healthcare outcomes and delivery.

Prof Tan, who is from a family of nine children, has had a long associ-

ation with the university - graduating from it in 1983, joining its Department of Medicine as a lecturer in 1987 and becoming the youngest NUS dean at the age of 38 in 1997.

The alumnus of St Joseph's Institution and Catholic Junior College served as NUS provost and deputy president before taking over at the end of 2008 from former president Shih Choon Fong, who is currently with NUS' faculty of engineering.

Professor Lim Pin, former vice-chancellor of NUS, said Prof Tan has raised the international standing of NUS, which is evident in the quality of its graduates, research and contribution to society.

NUS came in 22nd in the latest Times Higher Education World University Rankings this year, its highest position yet.

"He enjoys very strong support from staff, a key factor that has enabled him to achieve so much," said Prof Lim.

The fact that Prof Tan is an NUS alumnus makes the "sense of attachment and sentimental connection stronger", he added.

A milestone overseen by Prof Tan was the opening of the NUS UTown in 2011, which lets students live and learn alongside professors, and take multidisciplinary modules in small classes.

It shows how "a well-designed complex can create so many new possibilities for academic and experiential learning", said Prof Tan.

He also played a key role in the setting up of Duke-NUS Medical School - Singapore's first US-style graduate-entry medical school, which opened in 2005.

And he oversaw the formation of Singapore's first liberal arts college, Yale-NUS College, a tie-up between Yale University in the US and NUS.

While Duke and Yale are renowned universities, NUS did not import wholesale their programmes, but worked with both to create "unique and distinctive programmes" which have attracted high-quality students, said Prof Tan, who is married to Dr Evelyn

Lee, a consultant anaesthetist. The couple do not have children.

Under Prof Tan, NUS also developed its global links. For instance, it has expanded the NUS Overseas Colleges, sending about 300 NUS students to eight overseas colleges in the US, Europe and Asia. Since its launch in 2002, the programme's alumni and students have set up more than 250 companies, 18 of which have been sold.

"The overseas colleges have helped to produce a lot of talent that is underpinning the vibrant entrepreneurship ecosystem in Singapore," said Prof Tan. NUS provides incubation spaces locally and abroad in places like San Francisco.

The university's research is also more global today, he said, allowing its academics to tap a wider pool of expertise for possible solutions for issues in Singapore and Asia.

Prof Tan said the next challenge for NUS is to prepare students for the changing nature of work, and it has started doing so in recent years.

For instance, mandatory courses in critical skills like how to think have been introduced in the undergraduate programme.

PRACTICAL SKILLS

This is a potentially powerful way we can allow students to learn the fundamental knowledge and skills and yet be able to apply them in the workplace.



PROFESSOR TAN CHORH CHUAN, president of the National University of Singapore, on the university working with companies on its "cooperative education" programmes, to ensure students are given tasks related to what they study.

It started a 10-week module called the Roots and Wings programme last year for freshmen to learn life skills, such as helping them to reflect on their strengths, behaviours and attitudes.

Prof Tan said NUS is increasing the amount of industry participation in its degree programmes. Work attachments, of up to six months, have been made compulsory for NUS engineering and computing students since 2014.

It introduced this year three "co-operative education" programmes in information security, business analytics, and data science and analytics. Students will go on work attachments with the same company, alternating with regular academic semesters. NUS is working with the 20 or so companies involved to ensure students are given tasks related to what they study.

"We think this is a potentially powerful way we can allow students to learn the fundamental knowledge and skills and yet be able to apply them in the workplace," he said.

But he added that the goal is not to make education at NUS "more vocational", but to "make the work-related elements of education provide impetus for deeper learning".

"Because in the end what we want is for our students not just to learn how to work in a particular industry... From there, they should learn some deeper skills which are more transferrable."

Prof Tan, who will retain his position as professor of medicine at NUS, said he will miss interacting with students and staff, and being "immersed in the full breadth of what's happening in the university".

"In the morning I could be talking to some philosophers (and) I could be having lunch with some (from the) engineering faculty. In the evening I could be visiting a life science laboratory. It's a kind of community and environment where there are always new things happening... I will definitely miss that."

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Don took classes too

He is the president of the oldest and largest university in Singapore, but Professor Tan Chorh Chuan has also taken classes on campus.

For about six years, the National University of Singapore (NUS) president took classes with former NUS Chinese language lecturer Wang Ai Kim to learn how to speak and read the language.

"When I became president of NUS, I decided I'd better take Chinese lessons because we have so many Chinese partners, and China is such an important and growing university power in the world," said the 58-year-old, who had learnt Malay in school.

He spent two hours every Monday learning Chinese, "which was very good training", he said.

"It helped me a great deal in interacting with colleagues from Chinese universities when I visited China."

His first assignment was to memorise eight pages of Chinese news by listening to a tape recording and learning the hanyu pinyin of each word.

"I initially thought this was not very sound pedagogically but, being a good student, I actually did it."

He spent a few weeks learning the words by heart and, to his surprise, the method worked. "After memorising these eight pages, you cross a kind of mental barrier. It got easier after that."

Preparing for a speech in Mandarin takes him four times the amount of time he needs for a speech in English. "I wouldn't say I'm fluent but I would say I am able to hold a conversation," said Prof Tan, who stopped his Chinese lessons three to four years ago because of a lack of time.

But he maintains an interest in Chinese culture and painting, which was sparked by the six weeks he spent in China in 1988 on a solo backpacking trip.

He learnt how to paint Chinese landscapes in the mid-1990s, and still paints and sketches in ink whenever he has the time.

Amelia Teng