

» **NUS COMMENCEMENT CEREMONIES**

Don's shot of confidence helps ex-poly student make uni grade

BY SUMATHI V SELVARETNAM

WHEN he was in his teens, Mr Koh Chuan Hock never thought about going to junior college, let alone university.

The turning point for the former Nanyang Polytechnic student came when, at age 19, he did an industrial attachment at the National University of Singapore (NUS) – where Professor Vladimir Bajic gave him a much-needed confidence boost.

“He really believed in me and praised me in front of international research scientists... He inspired me to want to become a professor one day,” said Mr Koh, now 26.

Yesterday, the computational biology graduate proudly received his degree scroll from President S R Nathan at the NUS commencement ceremony. He also received a fully paid scholarship to pursue his PhD in the same field.

Yesterday's batch of 235 graduates were also honoured for achievements in student activities and other areas such as research, sports and social work.

Mr Koh, for one, was an outstanding sportsman who was a member of the school's dragon boat team and an Ironman triathlete.

The ceremony was the first of 23

Prof Shih's career moves draw sceptics

“They pointed out that I would be giving up lifetime tenure at a world-class research university for a five-year appointment at a teaching-oriented university. Some called it ‘career suicide in a cultural desert’.

My peers also questioned the kind of academic freedom I would have in a country that forbade the selling of chewing gum.

And now friends in Singapore are saying similar things about my going to Saudi Arabia: ‘Here, you

are on home ground. There, you will be in a real desert. Here, you are in a top university in Asia. There, it isn't even built yet. And while you may not care much for chewing gum, you do like your wine.’”

NUS PRESIDENT SHIH CHOON FONG on reactions to his moves – first to Singapore from Brown University in the mid-1990s, and now to Saudi Arabia at the end of the year. He will become the founding president of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology.

NUS commencement ceremonies this year over nine days.

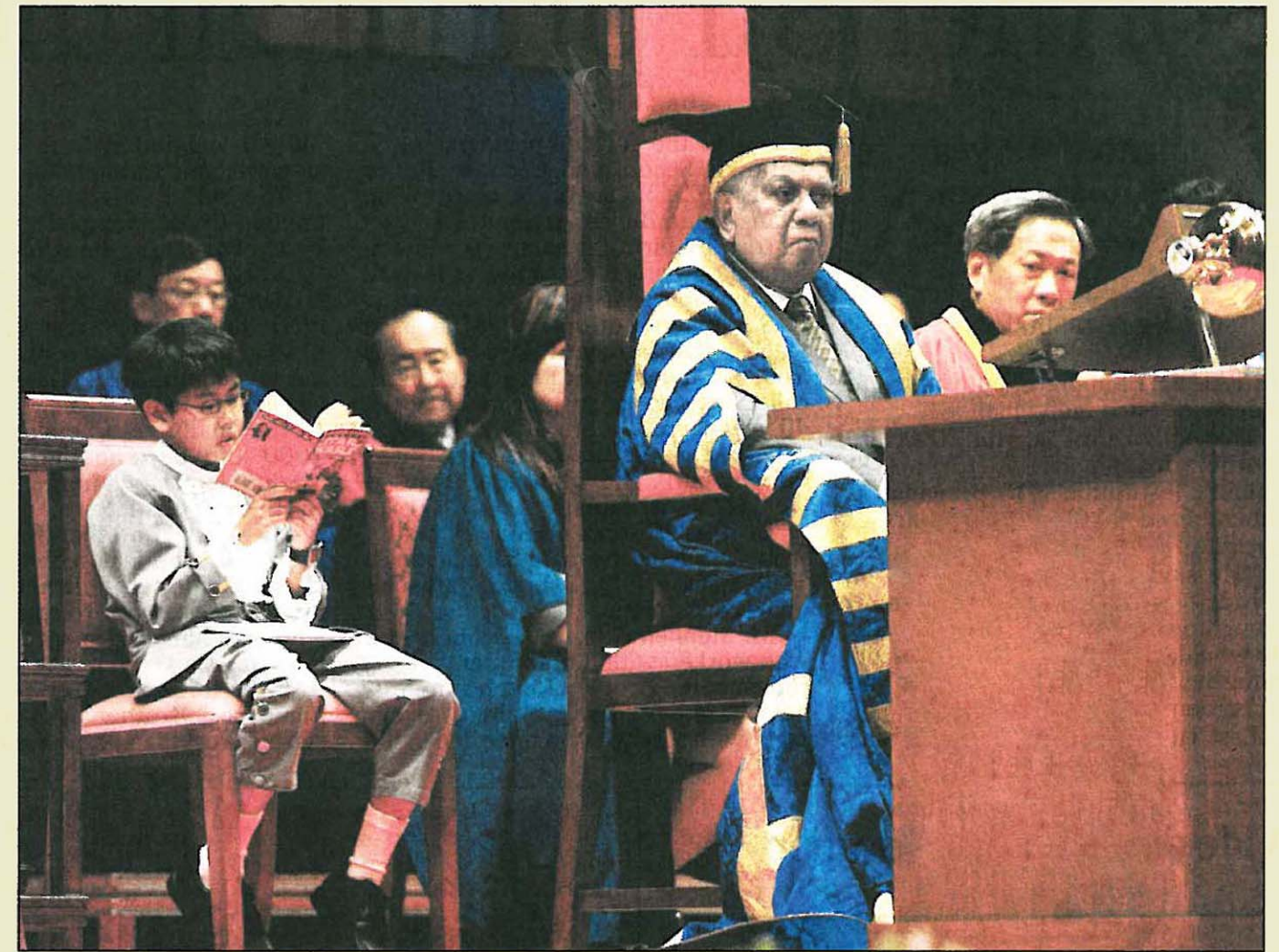
A total of 8,733 graduates will receive their degrees – 5,788 are getting bachelor's degrees and 2,945 higher degrees.

This year's commencement will also see the graduation of the first batch of students from 12 new degree courses.

At yesterday's ceremony, Mr Nathan, who is the NUS Chancellor, also conferred the Honorary

Doctor of Letters on Mr Wee Cho Yaw, chairman of the United Overseas Bank Group, for his achievements in the areas of banking, education and community leadership.

Outgoing NUS president Shih Choon Fong also delivered his final commencement address before he takes on the role of founding president at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia at the end of this year.



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A young boy – who had carried the train of the gown President S R Nathan wore as National University of Singapore (NUS) Chancellor –

reading a Star Wars book while NUS president Shih Choon Fong gave a speech at the NUS Commencement 2008 ceremony yesterday. This year, 8,733 graduates will receive their degrees.