

Chu: Head back to science





by Nicole Pun

President of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) Paul Chu Ching-wu will miss his camaraderie with students when he concludes his eight-year tenure at the university before packing up to go back to the United States to continue his career in scientific research.

“A good president (of a university) can have great impact on students. They will learn much from you,” said Prof Chu. “I gain a satisfaction that cannot be obtained from any science research.”

Being the president of HKUST, Prof Chu is always proud of his teaching staff and students. “When I attend professional meetings with other scientists overseas, I am delighted that they recognised some of my colleagues,” he said.

Prof Chu recalled a tragedy in which a female student of HKUST committed suicide a few years ago. “I regard students as my sons and daughters, so the incident affected me personally,” said Prof Chu.

But he also found personal warmth in this tragedy. At that time, students were very eager to help the student’s family and donated lots of money to them. He said that it contrasted greatly with the suicide of his friend’s daughter in the US in which no one paid attention to the family.

Prof Chu said the most regrettable thing during his presidency at HKUST was the lack of time spent with his students. “I want to have more time with my students, but I only have 24 hours a day,” he said.

He usually uses e-mail to communicate with students, who discuss the policies of the university as well as casual matters.

He also likes face-to-face communication with students. He said it is not a problem if students walk into his office and have a chat with him even without making an appointment in advance.

“As long as I’m free at that time they could drop by my office and have a talk with me,” he smiled.

Prof Chu was nominated as the Best University President of Hong Kong from 2002 to 2004 and from 2006 to 2007, according to a survey conducted by the Public Opinion Programme of the University of Hong Kong. However, he played down the accolade.

“Perfection doesn’t exist in the world; there’s always rooms for improvement,” he said.

To Prof Chu, time is something that cannot always be controlled and is the major difference between being a scientist and a university president. Being a scientist, he said he could fully control his time and work according to his own physical strength. He added that he likes being a scientist more than being the president.

“As a president (of a university), I’ve time constraints and I’ve to follow my schedule. It is impossible for me to cancel an appointment even though I’m tired,” he said.

Prof Chu, who is also a world renowned scientist specialising in superconductivity, will finish his presidentship at HKUST in August. He will be going to continue his research career in the United States.

Working in this field for about three decades, he said technology was the scaffolding in the development of societies and it could be popularised.

He once played the part of a doctor in *Technofrontier*, a television programme about technological achievement in Hong Kong, produced



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by Radio Television Hong Kong and the Innovation and Technology Commission, in which he dressed in a long white robe, wore a silver mask that covered half of his face and had his hair dyed silver.

“I hope I can change teenagers’ attitudes towards technology and scientists. They’re not as boring as they think. Also, I want to tell the public that there are people who contribute to the society through their technological achievements,” he said.

One of his future projects in the US is to popularise the use of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), which may greatly reduce the price of MRI. Poor countries will certainly benefit, according to Prof Chu.

With the support of the US Department of Defense, he said he

will also continue to study room-temperature superconductivity, materials with temperature that do not need to cool down during electricity transmission, which may have implication on the use of energy in a more environmentally-friendly way.

“Once we succeed in the research, the world will change. It will lead to a new industrial revolution,” he said.

Apart from doing research, he plans to spend more time with his wife, May Chu, daughter of late Chinese mathematician Chern Shiing-Shen, who resides in Houston.

Their two children are living in other cities now. His son is in Los Angeles where he established a small architecture company after graduation from Harvard University two years ago. His daughter works as an intern at a hospital in Dallas.

He said his children rarely visit him as they are busy with their work. They usually keep in touch by e-mail and phone.

“I take the initiative to meet them in the US,” he added. The latest family reunion was held in Dallas at the end of



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COURTESY OF PROF. PAUL CHUN CHING-WU

E-mail is commonly used by Prof. Chu to keep in touch with students and family.

Prof. Chu worked in his chemistry laboratory in Houston in the late 1980s.

“I am not going to retire now. I am just changing my job.”

last year when they celebrated the New Year together.

Although his family lives in the US and he has most of his time on life in that country where he has had greatest achievements, Prof. Chu only regards it as his second home.

He considers Taiwan as his real home, a place where he grew up and received his education from primary to university undergraduate.

“Taiwan is very important for me. The most important place for a person is the place where he grew up,” he said. “I sometimes dream about the old days in Taiwan.”

He ranks mainland China as his third home where he and his parents were born.

Hong Kong falls on the last of his ranking. “I did consider (Hong Kong) shortly after I came to the HKUST,” he said. But he also said that Hong Kong deeply impressed him in these eight years.

He said that he owns properties in many places, but having a house is not his definition of home. “I place emotional attachment higher than physical attachment,” he said.

“Wherever your heart is, your home is,” he added.

The 68-year-old scientist is still enthusiastic about his work.

“I will be busier than I am now,” he said. “I am not going to retire now. I am just changing my job.”

In the eyes of students...

Chan Yik-hei,
Year two,
Electronics
and Computer
Engineering,
Local student



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Chan was early admitted by the HKUST after HKCEE in May 2006 because of his scientific achievement. In 2004, his design of domestic security robot won him a Second Award in Engineering Category of the Intel International Science and Engineering and an asteroid that was named after him.

“He is my idol. He is an extraordinary professor who dares to be different and innovative. I respect him very much. I will miss me. Hopefully I can keep in touch with him. If I get a chance to visit the US, I wish I can meet him.”

Iris Chan Xi,

Year one, Physics,
Mainland student



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“He is an easygoing teacher. I remember students lined up to take pictures and chat with him in the welcoming ceremony of the first semester. I was happy to be one of them. Even though the university is finding a new president globally, I think it is hard to find someone better than him.”

Lam Wai-kin,

Year three, Physics,
Former Person In
Charge of Provisional
Executive Committee
of Student Union



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“He is open-minded, friendly and unbiased. He’ll definitely arrange a meeting with us when we asked for through Student Affairs Officer. His leave is a loss, we can hardly find a friendly president like him.”