NUS honorary degree for Philip Yeo

Spring S’pore chairman also offers the Class of 2011 some life lessons

By Leow Si Wan

The man associated with creating jobs for Singaporeans at agencies such as the Economic Development Board (EDB) yesterday offered three life lessons for the Class of 2011 at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Spring Singapore chairman Philip Yeo (above), 65, told them to, firstly, pick a job that makes them happy, one they have a passion for. He related several personal anecdotes and referred to people who have soared in their careers because they found it a good fit with their interests.

His second nugget: “While it is good to seize opportunities for oneself, it is far more rewarding to create opportunities for others”; it is a mantra from his own experience establishing scholarships and nurturing talent, which he hopes to see NUS graduates put into practice.

His third lesson was a call for them to “boldly make new friends” in an age when social networks make it so easy to get to know “amazing people” from whom one can learn.

He was speaking to 279 medical graduates, the first lot of 9,772 NUS graduates who will receive their scrolls in 21 ceremonies over the next eight days.

It was a red-letter day yesterday for Mr Yeo himself as well, as he was presented with an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from NUS.

Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine dean John Wong, who delivered the citation, described Mr Yeo as one of NUS’ “most illustrious alumni” and “someone who has transformed our economy, created thousands of quality jobs, inspired so many of us to believe that individuals do make a difference, and that Singapore’s destiny is in our hands”.

Prof Wong also gave a thumbnail sketch of Mr Yeo’s stellar career in public service.

Mr Yeo graduated from the University of Singapore with a Master of Science in systems engineering and was a Fulbright scholar at Harvard Business School.

In 1980, he was already the Second Permanent Secretary of Defence; at 39, he was tapped to lead the EDB. In 2001, he became chairman of the Agency for Science, Technology and Research and, from there, he moved to his current position at Spring Singapore.

Among yesterday’s graduates were the first 24 produced by the Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School. The remaining 255 were graduates of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

NUS president Tan Chor Chuan said to the Duke-NUS maiden batch: “You represent the beginning of a new and different medical tradition in NUS and Singapore.

As the pioneering class, you’ll blaze a new trail of excellence and commitment to our patients and society.”

Their counterparts from Yong Loo Lin, trained in clinical work, expressed eagerness to start collaborations with the more research-oriented Duke-NUS graduates.

Dr Brian Chia, 24, the valedictorian for Yong Loo Lin School, said: “I look forward to their help and to working with them to gain new perspective.”

President S R Nathan, who was at the event yesterday to hand out the degree scrolls as NUS chancellor for a last time, ahead of his stepping down as the country’s President, said he was pleased to do this as he, too, was an NUS alumnus. Singapore’s heads of state have traditionally been NUS chancellors.