President Tony Tan Keng Yam (centre) at the lunch yesterday to welcome him as the ninth chancellor of the National University of Singapore. On his right is Mr Wong Ngit Liong, chairman of the NUS Board of Trustees. ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

NUS homecoming for President Tan

Once a student and teacher there, he is now its chancellor

IT WAS a homecoming of sorts for President Tony Tan Keng Yam at the National University of Singapore (NUS) yesterday, at a lunch to welcome him as the university’s ninth chancellor.

The post, traditionally held by the head of state here, is not entirely new ground to him, as he was the university’s vice-chancellor from 1980 to 1981.

The university is not unfamiliar either, as he once taught physics and mathematics there, and before that walked its halls as a student.

At the lunch attended by close to 100 of the university’s management, staff, students and alumni and Minister for Education Heng Swee Keat, NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan noted that Dr Tan has “played every possible role” in the university – from that of a student to now, its chancellor.

And more than that, Prof Tan said, Dr Tan had achieved “unparalleled” distinction in each of these roles.

This began with his academic brilliance as a physics student at NUS predecessor University of Singapore, where he finished at the top of his class in 1962 with a first-class honours degree.

He next bagged his master of science scroll from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, returning in 1964 to teach physics. His next stop was the University of Adelaide, where he pursued a doctorate in applied mathematics, after which he returned to teach at NUS again – but this time, in the department of mathematics, from 1967 to 1969.

With Dr Tan also having been education minister and deputy prime minister overseeing university education, Prof Tan described him as “one of the principal architects of the transformation of the university sector”.

He said: “For NUS, his powerful vision of Singapore’s universities as world-class institutions excelling in education, research and entrepreneurship in service of Singapore and society, provided the impetus and support that has enabled us to rapidly attain our current high global reputation.”

NUS was ranked 27th best in the world and third best in Asia this year by Britain’s Times Higher Education magazine.

Prof Tan noted that Singapore’s seventh president has also been an active and supportive NUS alumnus – he and his wife Mary regularly attend alumni events and support alumni initiatives such as class reunions.

Dr Tan was conferred the eminence alumnus award by NUS in 2005, the highest recognition for alumni from the university.

Prof Tan said: “We are also delighted that NUS will have the benefit once again of his presence at the helm of our university. He truly stands out as a beacon and source of inspiration for every part of the NUS community.”

AMELIA TAN