They’re ahead of the class

Tan, 19, and Cheh, 20, are among the 9,913 students graduating from NUS this year.

SINGAPORE – Douglas Tan was only seven years old when he discovered a knack for solving mathematical problems, tackling sums meant for the upper primary and secondary levels.

He went on to join the Gifted Programme in Rosyth Primary School and, in 2006, enrolled in the National University of Singapore High School of Math and Science (NUSHS). At 15, he was offered a place at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Faculty of Science to study mathematics.

Tomorrow, the 19-year-old will be this year’s youngest graduate at NUS, receiving his Mathematics degree with a First Class Honours. This puts him almost six years ahead of those his age.

Douglas, who is currently serving his National Service (NS), said the thought of going to prestigious universities overseas never occurred to him. “I was just happy doing what I was doing — solving math problems,” he said.

In every class he took, Douglas was the youngest but it was neither “awkward nor tough to fit in”, he said. In fact, his age was a good conversation starter and his classmates, who were typically three to five years older, would take care of him.

Seeing that he could complete his degree before he entered NS, Douglas took on three modules a semester and completed the four-year course in just two and a half years.

The longest he had ever spent on a math problem was 10 hours over a few days. “I’m a perfectionist. When I do a problem, I try to do it with 100 per cent,” he noted.

Douglas aspires to be a mathematician and is looking into a Masters degree but he has yet to decide if he wants to do it here or overseas.

Another young outstanding graduate this year is 20-year-old Carmen Cheh, who received her degree in Computer Science last Friday with a First Class Honours and was on the dean’s list every academic year of the four-year course.

Offered a place at the NUS School of Computing after three and a half years in NUSHS, Carmen was then the youngest undergraduate of the programme at 16.

She was introduced to computer science and concept programming at 11 by her father, a doctor who also challenged her to solve puzzles he created. Her inability to solve them spurred her interest in the subject.

Carmen, who is from Perak in Malaysia, said she decided to study for her degree in Singapore as she wanted to study in a country she felt “comfortable” in. At the same time, she was awarded an ASEA scholarship to study in the Republic.

Next month, Carmen will begin her doctoral programme in Computer Science with a research assistantship at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The youngest ever to enrol into the NUS graduate programmes is Abigail Sin, who entered the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at 14. She graduated in 2010 at age 18 with First Class Honours. She also received the Lee Kuan Yew gold medal.

This week, NUS celebrates the graduation of 9,913 students, its largest cohort in six years.