Driving force

A passion for the field of engineering has kept Professor Simon Yu in academia for more than 20 years

by Sheryl Quek

“There is a saying that to understand a subject better, you teach. To master a subject, you write a book,” says Professor Simon Yu, 49.

For this academic, the single-minded desire to better understand engineering has driven him to dedicate his career to research and teaching of the subject. Prof Yu is the programme director of the new Sustainable Infrastructure Engineering (SIE) degree programme, which will be launched by the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) in September this year.

Dedicated to training specialists for the local underground transport industry, the highly specialised SIE degree programme is open to those with A-level qualifications and diploma holders from the five local polytechnics. At present, there are about 75 places for the first cohort.

Prior to his appointment in July last year, the Hong Kong-born professor spent 22 years at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

He started as a lecturer in the School of Mechanical and Production Engineering. His last appointment at NTU was head of the aerospace engineering division in the School of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering.

Explaining his decision to make the move to SIT, Prof Yu says: “I was inspired by the vision of Professor Tan Thiam Soon, president of SIT.

“His management team, including the provost Professor Ting Seng Keong, has a great heart for Singaporean students, especially those who are from humble backgrounds. We have a social mission to help these kids.”

The chance to join SIT is an opportunity of a lifetime, says Prof Yu.

“SIT is an exciting environment (to be working in) as it is a start-up and everything has to start from ground zero,” he adds.

For a new start-up like SIT, however, faculty members will have the opportunity to plan, formulate and run new degree programmes. The process is not just educational but also enriching.”

The bulk of his work at present comprises curriculum planning, recruiting professors and interviewing applicants for the programmes and procuring equipment and laboratory facilities.

His day starts at 9am and ends at around 6pm, and is packed with meetings.

“Expansive field

Growing up in Hong Kong, Prof Yu developed an interest in science at school. At university level, the field of mechanical engineering caught his interest.

“To me, it is the most versatile engineering discipline, which is applied to everything from gas turbines to tumble dryers,” says Prof Yu, who graduated from Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine’s Department of Mechanical Engineering with a Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) and Associateship of the City and Guilds of London Institute.

It was during the pursuit of his PhD that Prof Yu was influenced by his supervisor, the late Prof J. H. Whitelaw, to take the academic route. Explains Prof Yu: “A big professor usually has many students. Most of the time, research fellows and senior faculty members under the professor’s research group look after PhD students.

“In my case, no matter how busy he was, Prof Whitelaw would make time to talk to me. Sometimes it was even during the weekends, which was rare in the UK context.”

The generosity of Prof Yu’s late professor drove him to do the same for the university students he supervised when he became a professor.

“Many of them are doing great in their careers all over the globe,” he says.

With his experience and qualifications, Prof Yu could well have gone into the private sector.

“However, being a professor, I have the liberty to conduct fundamental research, in addition to the applied research that private sectors are focusing on. That is the main reason I’ve remained in the university environment.”

As for those who may be toying with the idea of entering academia, Prof Yu advises: “Don’t fantasise that the life of an academic will make you a rich man.

“But it will give you, as it has already given me, a lot of satisfaction in training young people and to see them become successful role models in society.”