



# Flying start to young professor's career

- ◆ Just 23 and an assistant professor at SMU
- ◆ Walks into first job, with a six-figure salary

By **THERESA TAN**

AT A time when most fresh graduates are pounding the streets looking for jobs, one 23-year-old man has a six-figure paycheck waiting for him.

Dr Chua Choong Tze, who finished his studies in May, will start teaching at the Singapore Management University (SMU) next month.

He will be an assistant professor of finance and the youngest assistant professor in Singapore.

While his boss, SMU provost Tan Chin Tiong, would not say exactly how much the university is paying him, he let on that, on average, a person with Dr Chua's credentials can earn at least US\$100,000 (S\$177,200) at any good American university for a nine-month contract.

And he added: "We are out there recruiting top people, we are paying top United States university salaries."

Dr Chua, who has a doctorate in statistics from the prestigious Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, is something of a whiz kid.

He was the first person in his department to complete his bachelors, masters and PhD degrees in five years. Most students take five years just to complete their doctorate.

He comes with glowing credentials from his professors, including his Wharton adviser, Dr Dean Foster who said a member of the US National Academy of Sciences had said Dr Chua's five year schedule was only reasonable for "the greatest statisticians".



TAN HOWEYANG

**A rare moment of rest** for Dr Chua, who completed his studies in record time and begins work next month.

For his doctoral thesis, Dr Chua created a new interest rate model that attempts to give more accurate forecasts of interest rate movements.

Prof Tan said: "Dr Chua's age doesn't come into the picture. A top PhD in finance is a rare commodity.

"His credentials are impeccable. And big-name professors have written very strong recommendations for him."

Dr Chua, a Malaysian, has long had his heart set on Singapore. His wife, elder brother, who is an accountant, and friends all live here.

He studied at Raffles Institution and Raffles Junior

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— **Dr Chua, who says he still found time for romance, hanging out with friends and at least seven hours of sleep daily**

College on an Asean scholarship — an Education Ministry scholarship that brings the best brains in the region here.

The younger son of tax

officers, Dr Chua graduated with first class honours in economics in two years.

He doubled his workload and completed his basic

degree in half the usual time to save money. It was the height of the Asian financial crisis then, and his parents could "hardly afford a US education".

He started working on his PhD in his third year.

He said of his doctoral classes: "It was scary at times. Sometimes, I had no idea what was going on in class. I basically had to catch up myself."

And unlike most PhD students, he started on his dissertation while attending doctoral classes.

He wanted to finish his PhD fast, to come home to his

Singaporean fiancée — now his wife — a 23-year-old civil servant he met at Wharton.

As a PhD candidate, Dr Chua also had to spend time teaching other students.

Still, he found time for romance, hanging out with friends and at least seven hours of sleep a day. Holidays were spent travelling to Europe and around the US.

"There's enough time to do all these things. You just don't waste time doing stupid things like chatting on ICQ or surfing the Web for no reason," said Dr Chua. "I'm very focused."

This articulate young man

## WHO EARNS \$180,000 A YEAR?

- ◆ A general manager of a local set-up, typically in his late 30s or early 40s.
- ◆ An accountant with more than 10 years' experience.
- ◆ A financial controller or finance director with more than 10 years' experience.
- ◆ An offshore engineer or project manager working in the oil and gas industry with more than 12 years' experience.
- ◆ A director in the pharmaceutical industry with 10 years' experience.
- ◆ A banker with at least seven years' experience.

— SOURCES: ADECCO PERSONNEL AND BTI CONSULTANTS

will stand in front of hundreds of students around his age, teaching them all about corporate finance.

"I think my age is an advantage as we are from the same generation, and it's easier to build a stronger rapport.

"Teaching is about engaging students and making things relevant," he said.

Dr Chua will also concentrate on his research work, which includes improving his interest rate model.

And he wants to do more.

He said: "I'm interested in youth development... I want to make a difference, cliché as it sounds."