ONE of his physics professors was headhunted and is now working at an American finance company. Another physicist had a job offer five days after his PhD exams at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and now earns an annual starting pay of $300,000 at an investment bank in London.

These are little-known anecdotes Professor Andrew Wee is happy to tell, even if they detail talent leaving the physical science sector for finance; the NUS Faculty of Science dean has an important takeaway lesson from them.

He says: “Top banks and finance companies prefer to recruit graduates from the hard sciences, such as theoretical or computational physics and mathematics. Such graduates have strong analytical and quantitative skills — much needed in the finance industry.”

It is a point Prof Wee has honed four months into the job and one he would focus on even at the end of his three-year appointment. In his dean’s message on his faculty’s website, he says: “If you have a passion for science, I have good news for you. You can make a living from science!”

What is implied is the extent of the competition the business and finance sectors pose to the hard sciences. Reflecting an international trend, NUS is not attracting enough students to major in the hard sciences. Only 5 per cent of its students major in physics, far fewer than what industry, research institutions and, especially, education needs.

For example, the Education Ministry is converting engineering graduates to the teaching of physics, Prof Wee informs TODAY.

But he does not want people to think that teaching is the only option for physics and maths graduates.

A quarter of science graduates take up education-related jobs, while another 25 per cent go into R&D. The rest pursue a variety of careers.

“(My) most immediate task is to explain to the students, parents and teachers that in this day and age, a strong scientific foundation is excellent preparation for the knowledge-based economy,” he says.

Perceptions will not change overnight, though. While anecdotes such as the two cited by Prof Wee are “prevalent” in the United States, this is not yet the case in Singapore. For the numbers to grow, more financial analysis work needs to be done here.

While he highlights the finance industry, Prof Wee, who has taught at NUS for 17 years and was previously physics head, would like nothing more than for “good students with a passion” to stay in the physical science sector.

And Prof Wee knows how much the job market matters to people. When asked if science suffers from an image problem, he points out that biomedical sciences are now extremely popular — 40 per cent of NUS science