Yale-NUS liberal arts college here by 2013?

By Tracy Quek
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NEW HAVEN: Singapore could have its first liberal arts college as soon as 2013, if a newly launched study between the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Yale University concludes that teaming up on the venture is feasible.

If finalised, it would be the first undergraduate college in Asia with Yale as a full partner, offering the broad-based, multidisciplinary education that the prestigious American university is famous for.

A liberal arts education trains “the cut of mind” and cultivates critical inquiry, said Education Minister Ng Eng Hen.

Such an approach, he told reporters over the weekend, “lends itself to the 21st century because many of our problems and challenges are multidisciplinary in nature”. The minister was wrapping up a four-day working trip to the US.

Dr Ng, who is also Second Minister for Defence, said that a liberal arts college in Singapore would introduce “a more well-developed approach to the training of future leaders”.

In the liberal arts, students study a variety of fields, from humanities to hard sciences, before going on to specialise.

This contrasts with a professional, vocational or technical curriculum where they specialise in a particular discipline from the get-go.

The idea of establishing a liberal arts college in Singapore was first mooted by
Campus to be built next to Kent Ridge

The International Academic Advisory Panel in its 2008 review of the Republic’s higher education sector said more space was needed for NUS, Singapore’s oldest university. To review its education system, the panel recommended the university to explore options for developing a larger campus.

Last Friday at Yale, De Ng witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan and Yale president Richard Levin.

"It’s about how we might continue to keep our human capital edge in Asia, particularly in the face of intensifying competition," Dr Ng said.

Both universities have been in discussions over the venture for more than a year, and are now working out a final agreement, due to be completed in several months.

Several details have emerged. According to a statement on the Yale Office of Public Affairs and Communications website, the Yale-NUS College in Singapore could open in the autumn of 2013.

The college would be a highly selective, small, autonomous school within NUS, taking in some 1,000 undergraduates in its early years. They would spend four years getting their degrees, which would be awarded through NUS, not Yale.

It would have a separate governing board, half of which would be composed of Yale appointees who would oversee curriculum, faculty appointments and admission policies.

The statement added that NUS and the Singapore Government would bear the cost of establishing and operating the college.

At NUS, a spokesman stressed, however, that the details—including the 2013 opening date—were preliminary and could be refined after further discussions.

Professor Levin told reporters last Friday that the new college would be housed in a campus to be built from scratch on a vacant plot of land next to NUS’ Kent Ridge campus.

As for course fees, De Ng said they are likely to be set at “very much higher.” The college’s initial budget would not include any new facilities, also as the speed of faculty-student ratio, as well as the spread of courses, available to students.

But, he added, a university endowment fund would be set up and needy students would be able to get financial help.

And while future students would experience many aspects of Yale’s education, from its curriculum to college life, Professor Levin stressed that the new college would blend East and West.

“We’re not just exporting Yale and putting it down in Singapore,” he said. “We’re going to create a new educational model for the 21st century, contextualised especially for Asia.”

While liberal arts education in the US is very much tied to Western tradition and development, Singapore’s college would develop a curriculum that would have East-West meeting, said Prof Levin.

A curriculum in which “the study of the great thinkers of the world isn’t confined to Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Nietzsche but include Confucius and the great thinkers of the Indian tradition,” he said, “and will bring those disparate points of view in conversation with one another.”

One feature from Yale that would make its way to Singapore, however, would be Yale’s residential college system. It would be an instrumental in developing a student’s intellectual life in and out of the classroom, it assigns all undergraduates to residential colleges, where they remain for their four years of study, dining, studying and socializing together as a close-knit community.

Liberal arts will catch on in Singapore, says minister

By TRACY QUEK

US CORRESPONDENT

NEW HAVEN AND BOSTON: A liberal arts education may be a relatively new concept to many Singaporeans, but Education Minister Ng Eng Hen believes that over time, parents, students and employers will come to recognise its value in nurturing future leaders in all fields.

Although it is not very well known in Singapore, where only some 200 students in the country graduate annually from a specialised curriculum that leads quickly to a professional degree — he noted that liberal arts education is catching on fast.

“Over the last few years it has become more widespread and well known,” he told Singapore reporters.

“We now have many Singaporeans who send their children to liberal arts colleges in the US, as well as US universities that have that particular bent.”

Dr Ng was speaking last Saturday at the end of a four-day working trip to the US, in which he visited Yale University in New Haven and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, near Boston.

His comments came a day after the Yale University and the National University of Singapore (NUS) inked a memorandum of understanding to work towards a collaboration on a liberal arts college in Singapore.

A pioneer of the liberal arts education in North America, Yale is well placed for this task. Founded in 1701, it has been refining and sharpening its broad-based model for almost 200 years. Its graduates, noted Dr Ng, “do outstandingly well compared to others who do the specialisation track.”

Yale has produced at least 17 Nobel laureates such as economist Paul Krugman, and no fewer than five US presidents, including Mr Bill Clinton, Mr George H.W. Bush and his son George W. Bush. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is another alumnus.

That is why NUS chose to pair with Yale as a partner, Dr Ng said. “I am confident that when the collaboration is finalised, it will be a popular course... people will see value in it,” he said.

The addition of a Yale-NUS liberal arts college and new tie-ups between Singapore’s fourth university and MIT on postgraduate programmes, he added, are part of the Singapore Government’s efforts to ensure that local universities provide students with an enriched education experience equivalent to what they can find overseas.

Yale president Richard Levin noted that Singapore’s plans for a liberal arts college also take place against a bigger backdrop of dramatic changes in higher education in Asia.

There is growing recognition across the region that entirely specialised undergraduate programmes and traditional Asian pedagogy that is “more one-way than give-and-take” may not be serving Asia best in the current environment, he told reporters.

Instead, he said, countries like China, India and South Korea desired to move towards a general education and pedagogy that encourages more independent, flexible thinking.

Many students are trying to make the point. The number of people from Asia, including Singapore, applying for a liberal arts education in the US has “skyrocketed over the past decade,” noted Professor Levin.

Yale, he said, has seen a tenfold increase in applicants from China and India in recent years. The Yale president also reminded Singapore for being an innovator in education in Asia.

A collaboration between NUS and Yale on a liberal arts college, he said, would be “an opportunity to create a model for all of Asia.”

He added: “It will serve Singapore’s needs by educating people for leadership, but it will also create a model and help revisit Singapore’s leadership in education across Asia.”