He cites an open and rational society that upholds spirit of inquiry as a plus.

BY SANDRA DAVIE
SENIOR WRITER

SINGAPORE is a society that wants to be open and connected to the world, to change, examine itself and understand what it stands for and where it must move, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday.

In fact, among Asian societies, Singapore is "probably the least dissimilar in ethos to Western societies", he said at the launch of the Yale-NUS College in Singapore (NUS) liberal arts college.

"We are open and rational, we uphold the spirit of inquiry, we encourage independent thinking," he said, pointing out that this is also reflected in how English is the working language.

"It’s a society within which a liberal arts college can blossom and grow, and help us to adapt to the changing world," he said.

To be opened in 2013, the Yale-NUS College is a collaboration between NUS and Yale from New Haven, Connecticut, in the US. The college, on the site of the former Warren Golf Club, will start with 150 students, growing to 1,000 later.

In the first two years, students will take general education courses bringing together Western and Asian perspectives before going on to concentrate on a major. At the end of four years, they will graduate with a bachelor of arts or science (honours) awarded by NUS, but their scrolls will include the Yale-NUS College name.

Addressing an audience of academics including Yale University president Richard Levin and NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan at the Kent Ridge campus, PM Lee said the liberal arts college is the first in Singapore, "indeed first of its kind in this part of the world", and is "breaking new ground".

He noted that Singapore’s education system has won international accolades and topped rankings, but the Government is always looking at how to improve it further.

Singapore students heading overseas are sought after by the best universities in the world. But many universities, especially those like Yale which is part of the US Ivy League, set national quotas to ensure a diverse student population.

"Singapore is already over-represented," he said, which means not all who qualify can be admitted.

In this regard, the Yale-NUS College will provide high-calibre students with an additional option to pursue a liberal arts education, comparable to what a student can get in Yale.

Although the majority of the students will be Singaporeans, Mr Lee said it will also have a good mix of foreigners who will bring fresh perspectives and enhance the education environment for all.

Hopefully, some will sink roots here after they graduate while those who return home will keep their links to Singapore.

A liberal arts education is distinct from other university programmes, he said. With its broad-based, multi-disciplinary education, smaller classes and intense residential experience, the college aims to nurture graduates who can think deeply, analyse issues from first principles, generate new insights, communicate well and make connections across different domains of knowledge.

"These graduates will be valuable for Singapore in a more complex and interconnected world," he said.

He said NUS will benefit from Yale's outstanding leadership and deep understanding of the liberal arts education in the US, while NUS has its distinctive global and Asian strengths and reputation.

But he acknowledged the venture will not be without its complications as Singapore is a different social and political context from the US. He did not refer directly to the issue of academic freedom that saw some Yale academics opposing the collaboration, but noted that Singapore has a different culture, different values and norms, as well as a different balance between rights and responsibilities and between the individual and society.

His remarks were echoed by Professor Levin, who was asked about the issue of academic freedom by Singaporean professors.

Prof Levin said Yale had done due diligence and was satisfied that there will be academic freedom on campus. He added that if Yale was going to engage with the world, it has to recognise that people have different values, cultures and systems.

"Engagement is better than putting our head in the sand," he said.

NUS’ Professor Tan said the time was ripe for a liberal arts education here as the world becomes more complex.

The two universities also unveiled the building plans for the college. Jointly designed by award-winning architects Kier- an Timbelakie and Pfeiffer Partners in the US and Tan Kok Hang of Forum Ar- chitects here, it will comprise three residential colleges that will each house 330 students. It will also have a performing arts centre, a science centre and a learning commons that will house the library, multimedia design labs and a gymnasium.

Yale and NUS also named more than 30 companies and organisations that have signed up to offer internships, including DBS Asset Management, Microsoft, Total Oil and Singapore Airlines.