A global education for a global age

By Fareed Zakaria

When I arrived at Yale from India in the fall of 1982, I felt distinctly unprepared. I had gone to a first rate, rigorous high school in Mumbai but, like many entering freshmen, I found that Yale operated at a different level.

In one sense, though, I had an advantage. I had studied, in depth, a whole different civilisation, and that background in Indian history, politics and culture gave me a broader context in which to place my Yale education. If Yale’s collaboration with the National University of Singapore (NUS) succeeds, it will create a much grander and more sophisticated scale a global education, a unique blend of East and West, which would be a vital asset in an increasingly connected world.

Criticism of the Yale-NUS venture have centred on Singapore’s politics. This has obscured the fact that Yale-NUS is, above all, a pioneering educational experiment. Yale and NUS hope to create a new model for liberal arts education in Asia – with lessons for all of us all over the world.

Imagine a curriculum in which students read Aristotle but also Confucius, who was his contemporary, and ask whether culture or politics explains each thinker’s concerns. Imagine studying the rule of Charles V, the Hapsburg emperor, but then comparing him to Akbar, who ruled more people in India contemporaneously. Imagine an introduction to science that focused on solving problems rather than memorising a body of material. The goal of the project is to create a liberal arts curriculum that spans Western, Asian and other traditions, that trains rigorously in science and social science and that will, as a result, provide inspiration for Asia’s burgeoning universities and societies.

A few years ago, the previous minister of education of Singapore, Mr. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who played a key role in the proposal to bring the liberal arts to his country, compared the Singaporean and American systems: “We both have meritocracies. Yours is a talent meritocracy, ours is an exam meritocracy. We know how to train people to take exams. You know how to use people’s talents to the fullest. Both are important, but there are some parts of the intellect that we are not able to test well – like creativity, curiosity, a sense of adventure, ambition. Most of all, America has a culture of learning that challenges conventional wisdom, even if it means challenging authority.”

This is the impressive and appropriate source of the Singaporean Government’s interest in liberal arts education. And Yale, more than any other institution I know, has “a culture of learning that challenges conventional wisdom.” That is the kind of culture that Yale hopes to see develop on the Singapore campus.

Many top Singaporean and other Asian students already come to the United States to get this kind of education, but ultimately, for critical pedagogy of this type to spread throughout Asia, there need to be functioning models of high-quality, engaged and creative teaching in Asia itself. That is what Yale-NUS College will provide – a model for conducting residential liberal arts education in Asia.

In talking with the faculty and administrators who have been involved in planning, I have been impressed with three facets of the college: the commitment to critical and creative thinking, the efforts to link residential life ambitiously to the educational missions of the college and the effort to reinvigorate traditional liberal arts curricula for the needs of contemporary students in Asia. By testing our ideas in a very different context, however, we will surely learn things that will be helpful in enhancing the educational experience at Yale.

Singapore is not a liberal democracy, though it is not so different from many Western democracies at earlier stages of development. It is not the caricature one sometimes reads about. Singapore is open to the world, embraces free markets and is routinely ranked as one of the least corrupt countries in the world.

It has also become more open over the last 10 years. In fact, it is to enhance and enrich this process that Singapore has invited Yale to help create a liberal arts college. There will be differences in perspectives among students and faculty, foreigners and locals, but that makes it an ideal place to engage with issues of democracy and liberalism.

I can imagine a fascinating seminar on democracy that would be much feistier in Singapore than at Yale precisely because there will be those who take positions quite critical of what is received wisdom in the West.

Singapore has a great deal to learn from America, and NUS has a great deal to learn from Yale. That’s why they have engaged in this collaboration. But it is a form of parochialism bordering on chauvinism – on the part of supposedly liberal and open-minded intellectuals – not to see that we too, in America and at Yale, can learn something from Singapore.

In fact, together, Yale and the National University of Singapore can teach the world in a new way to think about education in a globalised world.

The writer is the host of CNN’s Fareed Zakaria GPS, editor-at-large of Time magazine and a successor trustee of the Yale Corporation. This article first appeared at www.yaledailynews.com