Yale-NUS College holds its groundbreaking

PM Lee: school adds distinctive feature to higher education scene, another degree option

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SINGAPORE took a concrete step in its plans to include a liberal arts component in its increasingly diverse higher education landscape yesterday.

The Yale-NUS College, the country’s first residential liberal arts college, held its groundbreaking ceremony yesterday at the National University of Singapore (NUS) with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong as guest-of-honour.

Mr Lee said that the college’s “broad-based, multi-disciplinary undergraduate curriculum develops critical thinking, appreciation for complexity, communications and leadership skills”, along with an “immersive residential college system to promote personal and intellectual growth”.

“It takes the best of US liberal arts education from Yale, adds NUS’ distinctive global and Asian strengths and adapts it to our different social and cultural contexts to create an experience more relevant to students from Singapore and Asia,” he added.

Besides adding a distinctive feature to the higher education scene here, Mr Lee said that the college “gives high-calibre Singaporean students another option to pursue a degree at home, instead of going overseas, and also attracts top students from the region, and we hope after graduation some will strike roots here. Even those who do not will form a valuable network of friends of Singapore in their home countries”.

Singapore stands to benefit from an expanded and diversified university sector, which Mr Lee said will be done by “not by doing more of the same, but by diversifying the tertiary landscape to meet students’ wider interests and society’s changing needs”.

“Publicly funded university enrolment increased from 5 per cent in 1980 to 27 per cent today, and will soon reach 30 per cent. But still more aspire to a university education,” he said.

Even though the concept of a liberal-arts education is new in Singapore and the region, Pericles Lewis, president of the Yale-NUS College, is confident that this endeavour will kick-start the growth of liberal arts and science education in Asia. “As the first liberal-arts college in Singapore offering a proactive education through residential living and learning right here in the heart of Asia, we are breaking ground on multiple dimensions.”

The college is due to commence classes in August next year and will house three residential colleges with nine classrooms and 39 faculty offices per residential college. The college has enrolled 130 students for its first cohort, and expects the total student population at full capacity to hit 1,000. As phase one of the college’s campus is expected to be completed by January 2015, it will operate from the NUS’ University Town in the interim.

Professor Lewis said that the college will focus on three fronts for now, namely the hiring of staff to develop a high-quality student life and student affairs programme, to fine-tune the curriculum of the college to meet the needs of each course being offered, and to build a culture of liberal arts in Singapore.

On the last point, Professor Lewis said that employers in Singapore have shown support for the introduction of liberal-arts education and are looking to partner with the college in various ways. For instance, companies such as Google, KPMG and SingTel have agreed to provide internships for Yale-NUS students.