NUS staff testing mini electric cars

University signs deal with Toyota unit to try them out on campus

By GRACE CHUA

MINI electric vehicles have begun trundling around the National University of Singapore (NUS) campus.

The 10 single-seat vehicles, each a little more than half the length of a mid-sized sedan, join others being tested by agencies and private firms here.

The university’s engineering faculty yesterday signed an agreement with auto firm Toyota Tsusho Asia Pacific, a unit of Japanese automotive giant Toyota Group, to test the cars on the Kent Ridge campus for a year.

For starters, about 30 NUS employees will drive them between University Town and the engineering faculty, later, up to 50 staff and students with valid drivers’ licenses will get to use them, also on campus.

Mr Yasunobi Kakebara, Toyota Tsusho Asia Pacific’s executive vice-president and the chief operating officer of its business unit here, said roping students in as users would yield a better understanding of how their generation responds to such modes of transport and help produce a sound business model.

During the study, researchers will look into the performance and cost-effectiveness of these vehicles in tropical weather, and how well users take to them.

The interest in electric vehicles here and worldwide has been commercially in leaps for deliveries and personal travel.

Toyota Tsusho Asia Pacific did not reveal the cost of the NUS study, but each vehicle retails for 1 million yen ($8,000).

The second-generation vehicle, unveiled this month and available only in Japan, costs 700,000 yen.

Mr Kakebara is envisaging the day Toyota Tsusho owns and runs a fleet of these cars, shared by residents of a housing estate for short trips, such as from their home to a nearby mall.

NUS researchers also want to see whether these cars can be made to drive themselves. Professor Chua Kee Chiang of NUS electrical and computer engineering department said this would entail overcoming technical issues such as improving sensor technology, and non-technical issues such as liability and insurance.

Other electric cars are now being road-tested here in the Government’s $20 million, three-year trial, companies and agencies are using 17 such vehicles and 22 charging stations.

Electric vehicle services from smow has been testing electric bicycles around the National University campus since November, another six electric cars will be added to the fleet of two-wheelers.

Mr Tom Lokomiti, the director of Clean Mobility Singapore, which runs smow, said: “We have 15 bikes constantly roaming and 50 customers with a long wait list at seven stations. It’s a valid alternative to a taxi or your own car if you want to make short trips.”