Prime Minister also gives his take on the education system at groundbreaking ceremony

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SINGAPORE – Not perfect but overall not doing too badly, that was Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s assessment of the Republic’s education system, as he noted the stress that parents and students are under.

Speaking at the groundbreaking ceremony of the Yale-NUS liberal arts college, Mr Lee cited, among other things, Singapore’s standing in international educational rankings and the proportion of students in top universities overseas.

But he noted: “Our system is not perfect — parents and students (are) still stressed about tests and key examinations, tuition has become a minor national obsession — but despite that, overall (we are) not doing too badly.”

And as the demands on education changes, the Government will continue to expand the tertiary sector — “not by doing more of the same, but by diversifying tertiary landscape to meet students’ wider interests and society’s changing needs”, said Mr Lee.

The setting up of the Yale-NUS college would do just that. “It is a bold effort to create something new and different. Therefore it is not without risk, but we believe this is the right way forward,” said Mr Lee, as he reiterated that the college “will not be a replica” of Yale University in the United States.

Pointing to the Yale-NUS college’s aim to experiment with innovative learning approaches, Mr Lee said that this will spur “competitive pressure” within the university system.

Yale-NUS college’s inaugural president Pericles Lewis told reporters that Singapore’s approach — in offering a diversity of choices in the higher education sector — was “very wise”. Professor Lewis said that the college — which will take in its first batch of 150 students in August next year — will be “something brand new for this century”. This will be done by combining the longstanding traditional education at Yale and aspects of NUS education, as well as adapting from overseas models.

“We are hoping that many students who will otherwise go abroad will get the best education here in Singapore ... the students who are looking for that diversity, other types of offerings ... now, they have this option,” he said.

Providing an update, Prof Lewis said that there will be a deliberate effort to combine Eastern and Western elements in the curriculum.

Currently, there are 38 faculty members on board, including five from NUS and four from Yale. Having completed its maiden round of admissions, the college will conduct the next round at the end of this year. Publicity for student recruitment will also begin in other countries.

Prof Lewis stressed the importance of providing students with a college life in which those in the community can learn and bond with one another.

Ready in 2015, the Yale-NUS College campus will have sufficient common spaces for students to interact, beyond the classrooms, with each other and faculty members.

There will also be three residential colleges to enhance the undergraduate experience.

On the design of the college building, Prof Lewis said in his speech that it “seeks to find an architecture which balances eastern and western contexts and traditions”.

Prime Minister Lee viewing a model of the Yale-NUS College campus with architects Tan Kok Hiang and Fred Clarke (left), and President of Yale-NUS College Professor Pericles Lewis (right). (PHOTO: DO PORBOON KEONG)