Common Yale-NUS subjects for 1st 2 years

By KEZIA TOH

STUDENTS at Singapore’s new liberal arts college will all study the same subjects for the first two years, it emerged yesterday.

These will straddle the social sciences, humanities and natural sciences. After that, undergraduates will be able to choose majors in subjects that are of particular interest to them, but will still take a couple of common modules.

Details were revealed for the first time yesterday of the curriculum at Yale-NUS, which is due to open next August.

Dean of faculty Charles Bailyn told The Straits Times that teaching common subjects for the first two years would set it apart from its overseas parent institution, Yale University.

Undergraduates at the school in the United States take classes in certain foundational skills – writing, quantitative reasoning and a foreign language – but have no other prescribed programme of study.

“This institution has two parents but a child is not the same as its parents – it has a personality all of its own, with its own ideas, traditions and attitudes,” said Professor Bailyn.

He added that the Singapore school’s students will have no “high-stakes final exam” in their first semester.

Instead, they will be graded on discussions, projects and research, and how they present their results both orally and in writing.

By the third year of the four-year degree course, they will take majors such as anthropology, urban studies and life sciences.

While its curriculum may differ from Yale’s, the new college will be similar in one respect: Discussions in the classroom will not be restricted.

The partnership between Yale and the National University of Singapore (NUS) came under fire earlier this year from critics in the US who feared the new college would not uphold the American school’s principles of civil liberty and political freedom.

But Prof Bailyn said there would be no curbs on classroom debates.

Topics ranging from political parties to civil rights were legitimate topics for intellectual discussion, but “not necessarily as activism”.

The professor said that these were “serious intellectual questions which will show up in a very natural way”.

He added that faculty members would address the issues “with integrity and a respect for diversity”, and youngsters would be encouraged to share their views.

“When our students choose to do with that kind of learning for the rest of their lives – that is up to them,” he said.

Some of the classes will be the first of their kind here and will be based around themes rather than clearly defined subjects.

For example, students will take a Historical Immersion module in which they choose a period of history and use it to learn subjects such as economics, geography and politics.

They will also pick up knowledge about physics, chemistry and biology while studying the topic of water in an Integrated Science module.

This multidisciplinary training is why a substantial number of liberal arts students in the US go on to become research scientists – a move that could work well here.

Undergraduates typically have more time in the laboratories in a smaller liberal arts college than they would in a larger university.

Prof Bailyn added that scientific training in a liberal arts curriculum extended to practical skills such as managing funding, communicating with members of the public and even leading a team of scientists.

“People who have been trained to just solve problem sets turn out not to be as good at that,” he added.

Next August, the college will take in its first 150 undergraduates, who can choose from 14 majors.

It is now recruiting students from around the world to top up its current pool of 50, most of whom are Singaporeans.

The college now has 38 faculty members, and is hiring 15 more in specific fields such as art history, environmental studies and computer science.

keziatoh@sph.com.sg