EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Yale-NUS students can apply for ‘mystery internships’

They will only be informed where they are heading on the day the programme starts.

SINGAPORE – The inaugural batch of Yale-NUS College students will get out of the classroom for an entire week next month, as they delve into issues such as those faced by migrant workers here, as well as explore themes such as art and identity in their broader contexts.

As part of their project work, the 155 students, who will form groups of 10 to 12 members, can also travel overseas, such as to Indonesia’s city of Banda Aceh to explore the area devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and examine the reconstruction efforts carried out there.

And at the end of the second semester in their first year, students can apply to do “mystery internships” where they will only be informed where they are heading on the day the programme starts.

These programmes are aimed at providing students with experiential learning, as the inaugural batch began classes at Singapore’s first liberal arts college last week.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, as the media sat in on a Comparative Social Institutions class, Yale-NUS Dean of International and Professional Experience Anastasia Vrachnos said the mystery internship idea is meant to “create a space where students can practice taking a leap into the unknown and cultivate their ability to adapt to new environments”.

The internships will be drawn up based on students’ aspirations, strengths and areas they had indicated they would like to be challenged on.

On the day of their departure, students will then be informed about the details of where they are headed, which can be a local or international placement lasting between eight and 10 weeks.

The college will prepare the necessary travel arrangements — such as travel documents — and advise the students on the necessary preparations they need to make, including immunisations required, without revealing the location.

For their project work next month, students have 12 topics to choose from. Each topic is proposed by faculty members who are teaching different aspects of the Common Curriculum — a set of interconnected courses designed to provide students with a shared, intensive exploration of themes and topics ranging across all the academic disciplines from science to the humanities.

The setting up of the college, which is a tie-up between Yale and the National University of Singapore (NUS), had faced controversy, including concerns over human rights and academic freedom. Yale academics passed a resolution in April last year expressing concern “regarding the history of lack of respect for civil and political rights” in Singapore.

Asked if such objections still linger, Yale-NUS Dean of Faculty Charles Bailyn said on Monday there was a “real disconnect between (the) remaining strong voices of the Yale campus” as the year went on, which comprised “a relatively small group”. Some of the concerns raised became “weirdly detached”, even though effort was made to speak to those who had objected.

“There’s this one curious phenomenon where every time something goes wrong in China, it creates a new round of objections to Yale-NUS, and so you have to sit a long way away to think that what’s happening in China is something to do with what’s happening in Singapore,” Professor Bailyn added.