Yale-NUS ‘has to adapt liberal arts model to Asia’

It has to experiment and, to succeed, cannot be a carbon copy of Yale University; PM Lee

Sandra Davie
Senior Education Correspondent

Yale-NUS College has added “something different” to the education ecosystem here but, to succeed, it cannot be a carbon copy of Yale in New Haven in the United States, said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong yesterday.

Instead, the college, a tie-up between the National University of Singapore and US Ivy League institution Yale University, has to experiment and adapt the liberal arts education model to Asia, he said at the inauguration of the college campus.

“This is because while countries in Asia and around the world face similar challenges – such as income inequality, wage stagnation and rapid economic, social and political change – each country is faced with unique circumstances,” he said.

“While the challenges are similar, countries are not converging on a single universal social or political model that will best deal with these challenges under all circumstances,” said Mr Lee, adding that each country has different constraints and possibilities, and needs to find its own way forward.

Yale-NUS needs a curriculum and a college ethos that respond to the regional context of Asia, he told the students and university officials gathered as he affirmed the Government’s commitment to the “broad collaboration”.

“Graduates have to understand these countries, not just a theoretical, intellectual understanding on paper but actual experience living in Asia, interacting with fellow students from this region and outside,” he said.

Mr Lee also said Yale University wants to play a role in fast-rising Asia. Having a presence in Asia, it will be able to “feel the buzz of societies on the move, to respond to the zeitgeist, the issues and the priorities of a rising continent”, he said.

Yale-NUS College will add to the landscape with its innovative pedagogy and new learning approaches, said Mr Lee, adding that he is confident the school will create a unique model of academic excellence in Singapore.

Yale-NUS founding president Pericles Lewis said Yale-NUS had arrived in the last few years to “re-imagine liberal education for this century” by drawing from the traditions of learning both in Asia and in the West.

Describing the campus as a “learning landscape”, he said “This state-of-the-art campus provides our community with the resources to bring the best of the East and West together.”

Yale-NUS College took in its first batch of 255 students in 2013. Enrolment has grown since then to its third and largest intake of 300 students this year. The college has a total of 580 students from 28 countries.

The 64,000 sq m campus, designed by Pelli Clarke Pelli Architects of New Haven in the US and Forum Architects of Singapore, consists of three residential colleges, student rooms, seminar rooms, laboratories, fabrication studios, sky gardens, a library, a black box theatre, a performance hall and art studios, among other facilities.

Yesterday’s inauguration ceremony was also attended by Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung and college presidents from universities worldwide.