Students get taste of liberal arts in Yale course

144 high-achieving teens from 35 countries attend programme, held for first time in Singapore

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Secondary 4 student Stephanie Tan has many interests: physics, music, history, mathematics and philosophy, to name some.

“I like a lot of things. So the liberal arts really allow me to explore many different fields that I like and, after that, decide what I want to do in the future,” said the Nanyang Girls’ High School student.

So the 16-year-old was thrilled when she heard that Yale University, which is known for its liberal arts education, would be in Singapore for the first time this year to run an enrichment programme.

The Yale Young Global Scholars—Singapore (YYGS-Singapore) Programme, which costs US$3,500 ($4,700), aims to give students a taste of the liberal arts curriculum through lectures and small-group discussions with Yale and Yale-NUS faculty and students.

The first run at the Yale-NUS College campus, from May 30 to June 6, was attended by 144 students from 35 countries, of whom 34 were Singaporean. Over half of the participants received some financial help.

The students, aged 14 to 17, came from countries such as Brazil, India, Jordan and the US, and were chosen from more than 1,500 applicants.

YYGS spokesman said its overall acceptance rate is 20 to 25 per cent, which “represents a self-selective, high-achieving applicant pool.”

YYGS executive director Edward Wittenstein said Singapore was a natural choice because of Yale’s partnership with Yale-NUS College. The course will be held here again next year.

Formerly known as Ivy Scholars, the course for academically strong high school students was first held at Yale’s New Haven campus 15 years ago. Since 2014, it has expanded to six more countries — Ghana, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe in Africa, followed by China and Singapore this year.

Mr Wittenstein said Yale came to Asia this year because of the growing demand in the region for a liberal arts education. He noted that the Ivy League university had seen a rise in the number of applicants from Asian countries.

He said the aim of the programme here was to give students a sample of core liberal arts concepts, such as social sciences and physical sciences, through shorter lectures.

For instance, a 13-week course on international affairs could be condensed into a 90-minute session.

“The idea is not to develop mastery of content but to spur development of the underlying skills, such as analytical skills, public speaking, critical writing, working in teams,” said Mr Wittenstein, who added that course topics are customised for each country.

“Singapore’s role in economic development and as a model country for administration, governance, high-tech enterprise — these are all areas we seek to highlight.”

Among those who gave lectures at the recent course were environmental-studies professor John Wargo from Yale, and Yale-NUS Associate Professor Nomi Claire Lazar, who teaches political science.

Students also learnt essay-writing techniques, presentation and communication skills, and picked up tips on applying for college.

They worked on a group project that required them to compare Singapore’s story of development with those of other countries. Maro Anita Okti, 15, from Lagos, Nigeria, said her group studied socioeconomic, environmental and political differences between Brazil and Singapore.

“We used Singapore as a case study and the steps it has taken to be so successful, to see how they can apply to Brazil.”

Anthony Tr Phuc Nguyen from San Diego, California, said it was an eye-opener to interact with people from different walks of life.

“In the dining hall, we were talking about the Syrian refugee crisis. That’s not a topic that would randomly come up during lunch in school in the US,” said the 16-year-old who hopes to study engineering. “We even had a first-hand account from a Syrian student.”

Maro, who hopes to read law or economics, said the course has made her consider more university options. “I’m looking at anywhere in the world — Yale-NUS, Yale, Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge. I’m more open-minded.”

Stephanie (fourth from left) with her group at the Yale Young Global Scholars—Singapore course, which aims to give students a sample of core liberal arts concepts, such as social sciences and physical sciences, through shorter lectures.

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