SINGAPORE: Singapore’s fourth government-funded university will be a medium-sized institution, taking in not more than 3,000 students a year. For a start, it will take in about 500 students.

Minister of State for Education, Rear Admiral Lui Tuck Yew, said this in Parliament on Tuesday.

Rear-Adm Lui also said that the new university will be independent of the existing ones in Singapore and could offer integrated courses centred on Design, Engineering and Business. Engineering students could be required to study design to make user-friendly products and learn how to market them by taking business modules.

He said: “The new university could encourage this entrepreneurial spirit by offering students the flexibility to disrupt their studies for a year or two to start up their own businesses. Should they choose to, they can then come back to the university to complete their degrees.”

As for the proposed Liberal Arts College, the National University of Singapore (NUS) has submitted a proposal to establish a Liberal Arts College as a self-contained autonomous entity, similar to the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory or the NUS-Duke Graduate Medical School.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) is also looking at offering a liberal arts education as it expands its programmes.

Rear-Adm Lui said the government will study their proposals further before making its recommendation.

Rear-Adm Lui said the calibre of the students admitted to the proposed Liberal Arts College will be comparable to the best in the American Ivy League universities.

Professor Lily Kong, NUS vice-president (University & Global Relations), said: “One of the key advantages of situating a Liberal Arts College within a larger entity is that it can leverage on the reputation and resources of a university...”

“NUS proper might be interested to offer a course in Russian history, and maybe five students are interested to do it. The Liberal Arts College is interested to do it and another five students are interested to do it. You may not offer it if you were two stand-alone institutions, but as one (institution), the 5 plus 5 could come together and have a very lively, small class.”

NUS agrees that the Liberal Arts College education will cost slightly more than current degree programmes offered in Singapore.

Prof Kong explains: “A lot of liberal arts colleges will rely on various things, one of which would be higher fees. Two, would be endowment. That's a very critical part of it. In Singapore, the government does a great deal, so hopefully through a combination of the three sources, we might be able to manage an affordable education.”

The government has not provided any details on when the new university will be built.

With the new university, the government hopes to achieve its target of having enough university places for up to a third or 30% of each student cohort by 2015. This would require an additional 2,400 university places per year.

Meantime, the three universities will increase their student intakes so that from this year, a quarter of each cohort can enter university. That's an increase from 23.5% in 2007.

Out of the new 25% target, the Ministry of Education said that 19% were projected to come from A-Level students and 6% from polytechnic students.

Rear-Adm Lui said that currently about one in six polytechnic graduates proceeds to one of the three public universities in Singapore. But he hopes this can improve to one in five. That works out to 14,700 places this year, with 900 more to be added next year. - CNAIr