Liberal arts college likely to be affiliated to local varsity

BY SANDRA DAVIE

SINGAPORE is to have a small liberal arts college that will probably be affiliated to one of two local universities here.

In announcing this yesterday, Minister of State (Education) Lui Tuck Yew said it will not be modelled after those in the United States. Otherwise, it would be very expensive for students.

In the US, these colleges are set up as independent private institutions and they include Williams, Amherst and Swarthmore. Sought after for their broad-based and rigorous curriculum spanning the humanities and sciences, such colleges are characterised by a small intake of 200 to 300 students a year.

The teacher-to-student ratio tends to be small as well. As a result, tuition fees can be about US$43,000 (S$59,697) a year. But local students and parents are not familiar enough with the benefits of such an education to pay such high fees, said Rear-Admiral (NS) Lui, who chairs a committee tasked to look into how to expand the university sector.

He was explaining how his 13-member panel concluded that the US model is not viable for Singapore at this point. As an affiliate of a larger university, it will benefit from being able to leverage on the resources of its parent and keep fees affordable, he said.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) has made a proposal to set up a such a small autonomous college, he added.

Singapore Management University (SMU) has also shown interest, saying it is one way to expand its disciplinary coverage.

A liberal arts college focuses on undergraduate teaching that nurtures critical and creative thinking. In the US, they attract students whose calibre is comparable to those in Ivy League schools.

Also, the small intake allows for intense interaction among students and faculty to create a stimulating environment, said RADM Lui. He foresees a similar outcome here, saying the Singapore college will offer an “intellectually invigorating alternative”.

Mr Michael Palmer (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC) asked if the Government was prepared for radical views that could come out of a liberal arts learning environment.

RADM Lui said one purpose of setting up the college is to develop future leaders “with independent ideas and robust views.”

“Tempered by the experience and mentorship of their professors, these students will be well placed to become leaders working for the betterment of society.”

NUS senior deputy president Tan Chorh Chuan said it can offer liberal arts students double degree options as it has professional degree programmes and linkages to institutions like Yale University.

SMU said it is well-placed to offer an undergraduate liberal arts programme. It has in place many elements that are archetypal of a liberal arts education, including its seminar-style teaching in small class sizes.