3.1 Common Curriculum

Even as students at Yale-NUS College pursue personal goals and develop specific knowledge and skills, they all share in one powerful intellectual experience at the heart of their education: they complete an ambitious programme of coursework known as the Common Curriculum. This linked set of courses stimulates a community of learning that is centred on the most fundamental questions in the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences. All individuals benefit from some understanding of the natural world, of the human psyche and social life, literature, the arts and history, and philosophical and mathematical thought. By studying these topics together in a structured fashion, students build a common foundation of knowledge that covers many disciplines. They study issues of abiding human interest and of immediate contemporary importance in a deep and sustained manner, and they emerge with a shared set of references, allowing them to fall easily into serious conversation with one another about the books they have read and new scientific research programmes to which they have contributed. In this way the Common Curriculum creates a lively campus environment full of well-informed discussion and debate, which in turn deepens the intellectual development of each student. This foundation is key preparation for specialisation in a major and in the latter stages, continues alongside specialised study.

Creativity and a sense of wonder are highly prized at Yale-NUS, as are sharp analytic skills and the ability to craft persuasive arguments. In each part of the Common Curriculum, students are asked to engage in research and articulate and defend their positions, beliefs, and assumptions. Through such education, they gain an unusually broad understanding of many fields and a robust confidence in their ability to deploy different modes of thought and analysis. The habits of mind and the intellectual abilities gained through this intense form of education will serve them well as they confront the complex challenges of the 21st century world. In addition to the practical benefits that this course of study provides, students often find that a liberal arts and science education offers other rewards too. It can enrich their inner lives, lead them into friendships different from the ones that they might find elsewhere, and foster their ability to step outside the assumptions of their own time and place. The Common Curriculum is part of a larger collegiate environment that helps individuals to cultivate their talents, consider their social responsibilities, and appreciate the humanizing influence of intellectual inquiry.

Teaching and Learning

In most Common Curriculum courses, weekly lectures offer students a sustained analysis of their topic while small seminars encourage more active learning. The seminars are held twice weekly in groups of no more than 18 students. During those sessions the students may plunge into analysis of a data set or discuss the meaning of challenging texts. They can practise different forms of oral argument, from impromptu spoken responses to prepared presentations to debates. They can present creative essays as well as laboratory reports. They can offer quantitative analysis and assess existing scientific evidence; they can learn to draw inferences from data and to present their findings in clear and effective visual formats, drawing on artistic as well as logical skills.
Students will find that the Common Curriculum gives their studies a degree of intellectual coherence rarely found in higher education today. The courses have been designed in concert with one another, and each is carefully designed to be appropriate for students from a wide range of academic and personal backgrounds. Students are led to draw connections between multiple fields, discover links between literature, the social sciences, and the sciences, and connect these discoveries to topics and problems of contemporary society. Experts from outside the Yale-NUS community deliver guest lectures to offer additional vantage points on select topics.

One distinctive feature of the curriculum is ‘Week Seven’, a mid-semester programme of discussions and projects that is outside the scope of ordinary coursework. For one week, students leave behind disciplinary coursework and the regular seminars to share insights gained from different fields, and bring them to bear on contemporary problems and complex-projects. Faculty lead broad thematic discussions bridging the sciences, social sciences and humanities, and faculty and students together enter into brief but intense learning experiences that cross boundaries and promote creative thought. They may undertake research in a lab or explore a nearby field site; they may work with a professor on archival material, create a film or stage a one-act play by a local playwright. They might also travel outside Singapore. The week culminates in a day of presentations and performances demonstrating what has been achieved, and students return to the semester’s work refreshed with a renewed sense of purpose.