The Yale-NUS College Centre for Teaching & Learning (CTL) seeks to foster excellence in teaching, technology application and course design within the Yale-NUS College community and promote discussions and collaborations amongst the faculty in these areas. Our mission includes all aspects of faculty development. The CTL provides programming, consultations, and a forum of open dialogue about pedagogy and learning. A component of our mission is also to provide and disseminate educational research to our teaching community at Yale-NUS College. The CTL also runs the Peer Tutoring program at the College, extending our support of our living and learning environment to students in the residential setting.
Overview and Foreword

The Common Curriculum is a signature feature of our Yale-NUS understanding of liberal education. The vision of a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural Common Curriculum was a primary impetus for the creation of the College. The goal was to find an answer to the question: “What must a young person learn in order to lead a responsible life in this century?” A group of faculty and administrators from Yale and NUS began to answer this question in 2011, working with a group of inaugural faculty and with advisors from across the world. This process truly came to life, however, only with the arrival of the first cohort of students in 2013, for it was then that the faculty and students began the dialogue that has shaped the curriculum we have today. The Common Curriculum is the joint intellectual property achievement the Yale-NUS College faculty and students, developed in an exciting collaboration that is an impressive embodiment of our “community of learning.”

As Pericles Lewis, the College’s founding president, articulated at an early stage:

“...In an age of commodified information, an important part of our task is furnishing young minds with stories, histories, and patterns of thought from a variety of cultures. We place equal emphasis on the discipline of the mind, the expansion of powers. So we speak of what a young person must learn, rather than what he or she must know.” (from the Preface, Inaugural Curriculum Report, 2013).

The Common Curriculum is a response to this charge, and it provides the tools of thought, habits of mind, and methods of inquiry needed to understand the modern world and to develop what philosophers have called “the good life.” Our faculty and students together have grown immensely from the journey though the worlds of thought and inquiry in our Common Curriculum, and this journey will continue as future generations of faculty and students extend those conversations and continue to contribute their ideas and insights.

This booklet is intended to help guide faculty, students, and interested colleagues in other institutions through the rationale and implementation of the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum. It begins with an overview of the structure of the Common Curriculum (Chapter 1) and summaries of each of the Common
Curriculum courses (Chapter 2). These summaries provide just a snapshot of a much deeper inquiry extending over a semester or a year.

Any curriculum can be described in terms of its vision, its implementation, and perhaps most importantly how it is experienced by faculty as well as students. In Chapter 3, we provide an article that describes how faculty have experienced and refined the Common Curriculum, based on interviews and input from ten Common Curriculum facilitators working in seven courses. We would like to thank these facilitators Amber Carpenter, Martin Weissman, Jon Berrick, Terry Nardin, Joseph Alter, Christina Tarnopolsky, Steven Green, and Shaffique Adam – for their contributions to this essay. Finally, in Chapter 4, we describe how students have experienced the first years of the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum. We would like to thank Dean’s Fellow Joanna Lee for her work in bringing together these diverse student voices as they describe some of the rewards and challenges of the Common Curriculum from their perspectives.

Our Yale-NUS College curriculum was inspired by a guiding document that itself arose from years of discussion. This document, often called the “Garsten Report” after its first author, was developed in New Haven during 2012 and 2013 by the inaugural curriculum committee. The authors of the report – Bryan Garsten, Rajeev Patke, Charles Bailyn, Jane Jacobs, Kang Hway Chuan, and Bryan Penprase – all played important roles not only in developing the report but also in shaping the College in its early years. Appendix A provides an excerpt from Chapter 5 of this report that articulates our initial ideas about the Common Curriculum.

In 2015, based on several years’ experience, the Common Curriculum was reviewed by a Self-Study committee and an External Review Panel. Each of these committees gathered input from faculty and students and wrote reports that guided revisions to the Common Curriculum in 2016. We acknowledge the diligent and thoughtful work of the Self-Study Committee members – Chris Asplund, Charles Bailyn, Jane Jacobs, Rajeev Patke, Mira Seo, Jennifer Sheridan, Matt Walker, Martin Weissman, and Jennifer Raver – and attach in Appendix B the summary of their report. The External Review Panel included nine faculty members from NUS, Yale-NUS, and Yale University and made additional recommendations for revising the Common Curriculum. We include a summary of their report as Appendix C.

This booklet brings together the results of thought and effort by the entire Yale-NUS community, and we are grateful for the opportunity to share this work with that community and with a wider audience across the world. Like the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum, the booklet will continue to evolve. We expect it to be revised and enlarged as future versions of our curriculum emerge. We hope the booklet is helpful for facilitating this development, and thank the entire Yale-NUS community for making such an exciting vision a reality – one that continues to grow through the experience of our faculty and students.

Bryan Penprase
Director, Centre for Teaching & Learning (2015 - 2017)
Yale-NUS College
Introduction to the Common Curriculum

Terry Nardin, Professor of Political Science, Director of the Common Curriculum
The Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS

The Common Curriculum consists of ten courses designed to expose every student to different modes of inquiry and understanding. These courses make up just under one-third of the credits for graduation.

The Common Curriculum includes three two-semester sequences: Scientific Inquiry 1 and 2, Philosophy and Political Thought 1 and 2, and Literature and Humanities 1 and 2. Students also take a course in Quantitative Reasoning and two courses in the social sciences: Comparative Social Inquiry and Modern Social Thought. These nine courses are taken by all students in their first three semesters in the College. A tenth course, Historical Immersion, can be taken at anytime during the third or fourth years. All the courses except for Historical Immersion are taught by teams of professors working to pool their expertise, with each in charge of one or two small discussion groups.

[Figure 1: credit breakdown]

The Common Curriculum is an important differentiator of liberal learning at Yale-NUS. What is this difference?

Most institutions provide breadth through distribution requirements. This means that students select from a wide menu of courses, with courses grouped into categories such as the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences. The courses from among which students get to choose are typically introductions to, or surveys of, different fields.

In the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum, all students take the same ten courses and except for Historical Immersion they take them together. They go through the Common Curriculum with everyone else in their cohort. And because students are learning together, the Common Curriculum strengthens the College as a community of learning. They meet fellow students of different nationalities, from different secondary schools, living in different residential colleges, and choosing to major in different subjects and to pursue different careers. Despite these differences, all
students start their college experience at Yale-NUS in the same way. This not only gives them a common foundation for advanced work but, more importantly, their common experience creates bonds around learning. Faculty, too, work with one another: they are one another’s teachers as well as teachers of their students. Much of what they teach in the Common Curriculum falls outside their research areas. They support each other in teams and learn along with their students, modelling for them the challenges and pleasures of thinking outside one’s comfort zone, which is what a liberal education invites its students to do.

The Common Curriculum courses are not survey courses. Nor are they introductions to advanced study in any field. They are explorations of particular ways of knowing, focused on problems, themes, and texts that have been carefully chosen to convey deep understanding of the ideas and methods that define different modes of inquiry. This can be illustrated by the two Common Curriculum courses on scientific inquiry. Both are problem-based and multidisciplinary. They are concerned with “how do we know” questions, such as: “How do we know that species have evolved?” or “How do we know that the earth's climate is changing?” The courses are designed to challenge science-oriented students as well as those oriented toward the humanities by providing, not substantive introductions to subjects like biology or physics, but engagement with questions that involve drawing on multiple sciences and analytical skills to answer fundamental questions about the natural order. Instead of memorising formulas or doing problem sets, students learn how scientists go about solving actual scientific puzzles. This gives students, even those interested in science, an experience and a set of perspectives that they are unlikely to get in most science courses at the introductory level.

The Common Curriculum courses in the humanities and social sciences engage students in probing explorations of different modes of thought and different cultural traditions. Their aim is to cultivate curiosity and an appreciation of the diversity of intellectual life. A mode of thought is a way of looking at things, a distinct and basic way of making sense of experience. Historical investigation, science, literature, and philosophy are examples of modes of thought. Cutting across them are cultural traditions. In most liberal arts colleges, the curriculum draws heavily on great works of Western civilisation. The Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS, one of first colleges in Asia to provide liberal education, draws on a much wider range of cultural traditions, especially but not limited to those of India and China. In the Common Curriculum course on Philosophy and Political Thought, for example, students read the ancient Chinese sages as well as Plato and Aristotie, the Bhagavad-Gita as well Hobbes’s Leviathan. A third of the texts read in these courses are by Chinese authors and another third are from India. The materials in the course on Literature and Humanities are similarly diverse, and include visual “texts” along with written ones: theatre and film as well as novels and poetry. This diversity of texts and genres, modes and traditions, invites students to view the world from multiple angles. Understanding and appreciating this diversity of views is the foundation of liberal learning.

All students at Yale-NUS, regardless of the field in which they will eventually choose to specialise, study what are sometimes confusingly called the liberal arts. The “arts” in the expression liberal arts does not mean painting, music, and theatre, nor is it limited to the humanities. An art, in the sense intended, is a skill or a discipline. Literature or philosophy are arts but so are mathematics and astronomy. Writing is an art, and so is computer programming. The word “liberal” can also be misleading. It is not a political term – liberal does not mean progressive or anti-conservative. It means free. The liberal arts are ways of thinking, intellectual habits and proficiencies that equip those who have them to think on their own – to think freely, independently, critically, on paths they set for ourselves and along which they must make their own way.
When we say that we should “think outside the box” or, as in the famous Apple Mac ad, “think different,” we express the idea of thinking as standing back from the received truths of our society, class, faith, or profession. There is an irony here because these expressions are clichés, but the point they make is nevertheless important. As Hannah Arendt once put it, we must “stop and think” instead of allowing our thoughts to run unexamined in their usual grooves. Socrates, from whom Arendt took this inspiration, was not a professional philosopher, only a self-taught thinker – a person who valued thinking independently more than anything else. And he wanted to provoke independent thinking in others, too. He likened himself to a biting fly or a stinging ray: a creature able to stun those with whom he was interacting into a state of doubt or indecision, and in that way to open their minds to new thoughts.

The Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS is designed to have a similar effect on those who enter it. Instead of plotting a familiar and therefore safe route, it offers a series of intellectual challenges, each requiring the learner to acquire new ideas and skills. What one learns can therefore have unpredictable consequences. Choosing a liberal arts education is not like embarking on the study engineering or accounting. In a professional or vocational school, one’s choices are constrained. Students accept those constraints because they have already chosen a career. A liberal arts education requires breadth as well as depth and opens doors to a diversity of careers. It also equips students to continue learning new things and to adapt to change.

When they choose this path, students cannot know what careers they will eventually practice. One might start out with a plan to be an economist and end up by becoming a mathematician or a playwright. Most students in liberal arts colleges choose majors that are different from those they imagined they would choose when they entered college. Many will earn advanced degrees and will find themselves changing careers, probably more than once because change is now so rapid.

The Common Curriculum provides the breadth and flexibility young people need to choose their majors and then their careers intelligently. Common Curriculum courses are not primarily about content. They are about learning how to learn by acquiring the arts or habits that mark an educated person. In them, students acquire the complex skills of reading with care, writing and speaking eloquently and effectively, arguing logically, and handling data with facility. They learn the habit of paying close attention and the skill of being accurate. Above all, a liberal education cultivates intellectual curiosity and an openness to new ideas that mark an educated person.

The Common Curriculum, then, is a vital part of a Yale-NUS education and one that differentiates the College from other liberal arts institutions. But it is not a stand-alone effort. The Common Curriculum meshes with residential living and with co-curricular programmes like Week 7 and other “learning across boundaries” activities. It exposes a student to a wide range of disciplines before he or she chooses a major. And it gives a first taste of the individualised instruction that a small and intimate residential college can provide, but in a way that takes advantage of the resources of Yale and NUS, the research universities with which it is closely linked.
Literature and Humanities (LH) 1 & 2

In this set of courses, students explore mythmaking and storytelling in a variety of traditions to understand how poets, historians, and visual artists represented their own worlds and times. The multiplicity of forms, from epic, drama, historiography and narrative to the visual arts and architecture, reveals a wide range of possible expressions. The temporal distance and cultural differences between works encourage students to observe closely, think comparatively, and engage with complexity. Students have the opportunity to cultivate the cultural, aesthetic, and rhetorical sensitivity to become cosmopolitan readers of the human experience.

Course Objectives

**Foundational knowledge and skills.** These are developed by engaging with primary works of literary or visual art directly and through discussion. Students learn to:

- Understand the historical context and broader cultural significance of each work.
- Analyze the formal elements of artistic works in a variety of media by critically reading or looking.
- Develop persuasive oral and written arguments grounded in evidence and informed judgment.
- Evaluate and engage the claims of others about factual, logical, and rhetorical criteria through careful listening and civil, rational discourse.

**Transformative and experiential goals.** Students will acquire an enhanced capacity to:

- Recognise and appreciate detail and complexity in aesthetic, intellectual works and in one’s self.
- Use a comparative perspective to apprehend the holistic structure of a work or works to make relevant comparisons that enhance evaluation of the things compared.
- Seek alternative modes of thought by drawing on a rich body of ideas and experience from different pasts and imaginaries.
- Cultivate “critical feeling,” the capacity to empathise with another’s experience (whether real or fictional) while maintaining critical reflection.

Pedagogy

Students attend one lecture and two seminars each week. Lectures provide an opportunity for faculty to deliver content and context that empowers students to read and discuss the texts in a sophisticated way.

Individual seminar Tutors continue to adopt a range of classroom activities. In addition to an alternation of small-group and full-class discussion formats, students may act as Discussants (setting the agenda and leading the discussion for a particular seminar) and Timelords (producing a short introduction to the new text for the benefit of the class) or be required to submit a certain number of blog posts per semester to enhance communication and thinking about texts between seminars.

Tutors bridge lectures and seminars in a number of ways. Some provide short quizzes at the beginning of the following seminar, while others encourage integration of lecture material with private seminar reading during the seminar discussion itself, with the tutor often leading by example by reflecting on what he/she learnt from the lecture/how the lecture helped to sharpen his/her reading of the text.

By engaging in close reading and discussion to develop aesthetic, rhetorical, and cultural literacy, students will become cosmopolitan readers of the human experience.

Course Readings and Topics

LH 1 covers three sets of cognate texts:

1. the epic adventures of Rama and Odysseus in Valmiki’s *Ramayana* and Homer’s *Odyssey* respectively;
2. the historical writings of Herodotus and Sima Qian;
3. the complex weaving of contemporary tales in 1001 *Nights* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

These writings introduced fundamental human questions and established their artistic forms. Themes that emerged and deepened over the course of the semester include: boundaries and relationships between god, man and beast; the
function of journey and travelling; negotiating the foreign/‘other’; gender stereotypes both enforced and confounded; the function of storytelling; the function of poetry; the distinction between poetic and historical discourse; the power of human intellect (wit, cunning).

LH 2 covers texts that attempt to represent a modern world which many saw as increasingly difficult to represent due to historical, philosophical, and technological shifts. These texts are:

- William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*
- Honoré de Balzac’s *Père Goriot*
- Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*
- Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*
- Eileen Chang’s *Love in a Fallen City*
- Tayeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North*
- Sonny Liew’s *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*.

These texts pinpoint cultural responses from artists and audiences to a broad variety of transformations: the formation of national identity in the development of vernacular literatures; the challenges and opportunities of modern urbanisms; the experiences of cross-cultural encounters; and the creation of new social movements. Moreover, as we sample from a vast range of modern artistic expressions, this course negotiates the relation between artistic production and the particularities of each culture and society in which each work was produced.

**Assignments & Assessment Methods**

In LH 1 and 2, seminar contribution has thus constituted 40% of the grade. Sometimes, seminar contributions may include section-specific assignments. All seminars involve reflecting, speaking, listening and writing. Seminar groups may also involve more specific activities, such as quizzes, blog posts and seminar discussion leading.

In both LH 1 and 2, there are 3 short written assignments evenly distributed throughout the semester. Common written assignments constitute 60% of the grade.

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**Philosophical and Political Thought (PPT) 1 & 2**

This two-semester course introduces students to important traditions, figures, and themes in the history of philosophy and political thought. It explores some of the deepest questions that have been asked, in the company of some of the world’s finest attempts to address them. Semester One’s readings offer ancient wisdom in the form of dialogues between different interlocutors, and the mode of instruction in the Yale-NUS classroom will reflect this dialogical format as students are encouraged to interrogate their own assumptions through discussion. Semester Two brings students into contact with the intellectual makers of the modern world and with their deepest critics. Here, students will develop understandings of how different conceptions of modernity and enlightenment appear and shed light on one another.

**Course Objectives**

The goal of the course is for students to become responsible participants in dialogue by being able to:

- Distinguish sound arguments from specious ones, and respond to objections and counter-arguments in a clear and orderly way, both in writing and speech.
- Discriminate constructive questions and articulate them at appropriate points.
- Develop a capacity for empathetic understanding as well as habits of sceptical questioning by exploring difficult texts about perennially challenging questions.
- Immerse themselves in the intellectual world of certain authors deeply enough to gain an understanding of their distinct patterns of thought.
- Become familiar with major strands of moral reasoning and ethical thought, philosophical approaches to the nature of reality and human perception, and theoretical accounts of politics and justice.
- Reflect on the deepest sources of their beliefs about the world, justifying their opinions about what is good and worthy of admiration, and articulating the nature of their obligations to others.
Pedagogy

We will engage with key concepts, questions, and themes that animated each tradition, and with overarching questions and themes shared among all of them. At the same time, we will attend to significant variations and disagreements, both within and between, these traditions of philosophy and political thought. Writing goals for common assessments are laid out in advance to help students develop specific writing skills through assignments. Students should also develop oral skills through seminar participation.

Course Topics & Readings

The first semester of this course focuses on developing skills in conversation with thinkers who have set the standard for such thinking in classical China, Greece, and India. It explores some of the deepest questions that have been asked, in a variety of ways. What is the good life? What am I? What do I owe to others? Who should rule? What, if anything, justifies the state and what role should it play in our lives? What is there? How do I know what I am or what there is? Reading for PPT 1 comprise selections from the following texts:

- Works by Mozi, Mengzi, Xunzi and Zhuangzi
- Plato’s Five Dialogues
- Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and Politics
- The Bhagavad Gita
- Shankara’s Bhagavadgita-bhasya
- Ramanuja’s Gita-bhasya
- Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakosabhasya
- Vatsyayana’s Nyaya-Bhasya
- Uddyotakara’s Nyaya-Varttika
- Marcus Aurelius’s Meditations
- Milinda’s Questions

PPT 2 considers questions arising in the traditions of India, China, and Europe, giving attention to differences within as well as between them. The course moves from metaphysics and epistemology to ideas about the state, national self-determination, and the relationship between thinking and doing. What can we know and how can we know it? How is knowledge related to acting well? What is a state and what is its proper purpose? What is the relationship between governing and the interests or rights of the governed? These questions identify threads that run through the course and link our concerns with those of our predecessors stretching back to ancient times in the traditions we consider. Reading for PPT 2 comprised selections from the following:

- Santideva’s Bodhicaryavatara
- Zhu Xi’s Categorised Conversations
- Annambhatta’s Tarkasamgraha
- Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy Ibn Yaqzan
- René Descartes’s Meditations on First Philosophy
- Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan
- Huang Zongxi’s Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince
- John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty
- Friedrich Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals
- Liang Qichao’s “On Rights Consciousness”
- Chen Duxiu, “The Constitution and Confucianism”
- Mou Zongsan and others, “A Manifesto for a Re-Appraisal of Sinology and the Reconstruction of Chinese Culture”
- Mohandas K. Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj
- Hannah Arendt’s “Thinking and Moral Considerations.”

Assignments and Assessment Methods

In both PPT 1 and 2, there are three common writing assessments spread throughout the semester. The writing assignments are the same across sections, and each demands a different set of skills such as close reading, developing an exposition, stating objections and responses, comparing views and taking a stand. These constitute 60% of the grade.

Seminar contributions constitute 40% of the grade. Further speaking and writing exercises may vary from one seminar group to another. PPT 1 and 2 also have a seminar-specific symposium at the end of the semester and which serves consolidating and reflect upon what has been learned.
Comparative Social Inquiry

Human beings create the norms and institutions that enable and constrain them. In turn, we are shaped and molded by these norms and institutions. This course investigates these connections and asks probing questions about society, social change, and the human condition. The course aims to heighten shared awareness of important social forces, which often hide in plain sight, by comparing families, communities, countries, and other social units across the globe and over time. By the end of the course, students should be in a better position to question why things are the way they are and to think about how to change the things they conclude need changing.

Course Objectives

Through careful reading, intense discussion, and practical research, students in Comparative Social Inquiry will:

1. Begin to question their positions in the social world
2. Come to understand a range of analytic approaches within the social sciences, and the kinds of questions that social scientists pose about individuals, groups, and social institutions
3. Appreciate the interplay of norms, power, mechanisms of social construction and dynamics of social change that create, sustain and alter social institutions over time and space
4. Be able to describe and evaluate different explanations of human behaviour
5. Demonstrate comfort with conventions of scholarly writing and citation
6. Understand the aims and opportunities of a liberal arts education, which is as much about preparing to lead a more fulfilling life as for employment.

Pedagogy

Instructors seek to:

1. Communicate enthusiasm for social inquiry.
2. Create a learning environment that primes student curiosity and an inclination toward experimentation and questioning

3. Expose students to central thinkers, important essays, and scholarly articles in the various social sciences
4. Press students to read difficult works carefully and critically
5. Conduct discussion-based seminars, which requires students to contribute to our shared inquiry into and understanding of course material
6. Raise difficult and sometimes uncomfortable questions about what is assumed to be ‘natural’ and ‘true’ in the world
7. Heighten student power in the world by enhancing their abilities to strategically read the social terrain.

Course Topics and Readings

Unit 1 – Introduction and Orientation:
Introduction; How did you get into Yale-NUS College?

Unit 2 – Social Influence:
The Ubiquity of Conformity; Social Influence and Public Policy

Unit 3 – Power:
Faces of Power; Power in Practice

Unit 4 – The State:
Seeing like a State; Social States and Change

Unit 5 – Markets and Corporations:
Markets, Money and Firms; Markets and Morals

Unit 6 – Path Dependency and Social Change:
Path Dependency; Tools of Change

Unit 7 – Social Movements:
System Change and Climate Change, Social Movements and Creativity
Unit 8 – Social Class:
  History and the Three Approaches to Class Analysis; Bourdieau’s
  Class Reproduction and Patterns of Mobility—The Case of Educational
  Reproduction

Unit 9 – Race:
  The Historical Construction of Race; Identity and Intersectionality

Unit 10 – Gender:
  The Social and Cultural Construction of Gender; Gender in the Workplace

Unit 11 – Family:
  The Social and Cultural Construction of Family; Family and Marriage,
  Continuity and Change

Unit 12 – The Study of Religion:
  The Elementary Forms; Ritual, Liminality and Communitas

Reading for this course includes They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Persuasive
Writing, 3rd Edition, by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. Readings and other
material were assigned weekly and available on Canvas, or via email from each
seminar instructor.

Assignments and Assessment Methods

Assignments for CSI include a short essay at the beginning of the semester, weekly
quizzes, seminar participation, a research critique, an annotated bibliography and a
final research paper.

Quantitative Reasoning

The course aims to develop confidence and facility in various ways of reasoning
quantitatively, coupled with a sense of what kinds of argument are appropriate
to different situations. Students will come to understand the modes of reasoned
persuasion, often called “proofs,” that apply in various contexts, ranging from
the well-defined but abstract concepts of mathematics to the less clear-cut real-
world situations where statistical methods are employed. This should provide good
grounding for later studies applying statistics in the natural and social sciences.

Course Objectives

Students in Quantitative Reasoning will:

- Learn how to criticize and question claims in an informed way.
- Learn to think clearly, to understand logical and intuitive reasoning, and to
  consider appropriate standards of proof in different contexts.
- Develop a facility for and comfort with a variety of representations of
  quantitative data, as well as practical experience in gathering data.
- Understand sources of bias and error in seemingly objective numerical data.
- Become familiar with the basic concepts of probability and statistics, with
  particular emphasis on recognising when these techniques provide reliable
  results and when they threaten to mislead us.

Pedagogy

Team-based Learning. The students reading this course are diverse, so the purpose
of team-based learning is to allow cross-pollination of ideas between students with
varying skills, interests and study plans. Teams of five or six students will be formed
at the start of semester, designed to ensure a mix of talents and backgrounds,
and they will work together on activities during and outside of class. A key element
of team-based learning is that the whole is more than the sum of the parts, so by
debating within teams, students will learn more than if they worked independently
– not only subject-specific knowledge, but also valuable skills in managing a group,
reaching consensus, working together efficiently, and identifying and appreciating
each other’s strengths. This affords an excellent opportunity for students to develop
their oral communication skills, and to reflect on how the various team members convince others, or themselves, of an assertion.

**Hands-on activities.** A second element of the course is the way class learning takes place during activities in which students experience the topic first-hand, be it becoming aware of their own biases, or in performing an in-class experiment. The faculty believe this is important in demonstrating that the concepts in the course are real and important, and not mere abstract ideas. Earnest preparation for each of the week’s two two-hour seminar sessions is essential for this course. This is reckoned to amount to about 8 hours’ study weekly before classes. In most classes, this study will be tested on arrival in the class, first individually, and then in teams.

**Course Topics & Readings**

**Introduction - Basic numeracy**
- Quantitative Reasoning: why, what, how; Reasoning with numbers
- Innumeracy in the media; Estimating and sizing up numbers; Visualising numbers.

**Visualising data, descriptive statistics**
- Describing and summarising data: mean, sd, median, etc.;
- Visualising data using plots; Plotting and manipulating data with R and spreadsheets; Normal distribution and z-scores.

**Formal Logic**
- Contexts and logical reasoning; Syllogisms; Fallacies; Natural language logic; Formal logic; Mathematical Proofs.

**Probability**
- Basic probability; The meaning of probability; Venn diagrams; Odds;
- Conditional probability; Reversing the conditional: Natural frequencies, trees, and Bayes’ rule

**Operationalisation, Surveys**
- Randomness and sample surveys; Conceptualisation: from idea to precise definition; Operationalisation: from definition to observable activities; Scales and indexes; Choice of survey topics

**Expected values**
- Random variables; Expected values

**Sampling distributions**
- Sampling distributions; Central Limit Theorem: assumptions; Sampling error;
- Taking good samples; Simulating samples in R

**Hypothesis testing**
- Confidence interval: quantifying uncertainty; The null vs alternate hypotheses;
- Test statistics: z-test & t-test, etc.; Rejecting the null; The meaning of P-values;
- Errors: Type I vs Type II; Connections: CI and hypothesis tests

**Correlation and regression**
- Correlation coefficient: meaning and construction; Correlation is not causation; Linear models: Slope, intercept and residuals; Best fit: Least squares; regression line; R : The variation accounted for; Changing variables for a linear fit; Significance of fit parameters; Regression inference

**Prospect theory; Heuristics and biases**
- Utility theory; Aversion; Prospect theory; Qualitative heuristics and biases:
  - Thinking fast & slow

**Textbook:** Stats, Data and Models by De Veaux R D, Velleman P F, Bock D E.

**Assignments and Assessment Methods**

This course requires both individual work and team work. For individual work, students are expected to regularly take Individual Readiness Assurance Tests (IRATs), which helps ensure students are prepared for the content they are about to learn in the class. There are also larger tests which contribute a larger percentage of the grade. Students are also assessed on their contributions to class discussion, and are assessed by their peers for their contribution to team work.

For team work, students are expected to work together to take Team Readiness Assurance Tests (TRATs), as well as work in groups on a project presentation and a written report.
Scientific Inquiry (SI) 1 & 2

These courses approach science not only as a body of knowledge but as the process by which human beings have discovered truths about the universe and our position in it, starting from no assumptions but one: that the universe behaves according to natural laws. The courses aim to foster an understanding of how scientific knowledge is arrived at, using evolution as an example in Scientific Inquiry 1 and climate change as an example in Scientific Inquiry 2.

Course Objectives:

Scientific Inquiry aims to help students:

• Appreciate the distinctions between scientific and non-scientific explanations, and to understand how the boundary shifts with advances in understanding.
• Learn to communicate scientific ideas to a variety of audiences and discuss their importance in an informed and sophisticated manner.
• Come to understand the underlying assumptions of various methodologies in science.
• See how scientists design experiments to study objects that may not be directly observable, and how they aim to do science in circumstances in which controlled experimentation is not possible.
• Consider the ways in which scientists try to reconcile observations that seem inconsistent with one another.
• Recognise what is at stake when scientists make claims and counterclaims in peer-reviewed journals and the popular press.
• Grasp how scientists transfer useful ideas from one field to another, and precisely what it means to discover a scientific result.

Pedagogy

In many science courses, all the facts, laws, theories and principles taught make it easy to forget that every one of them was discovered by humans who debated the evidence, developed explanations, rejected ideas when evidence accumulated against them, and established new ideas through the powers of deduction and human imagination.

SI aims to foster an appreciation for the process of science, using a single example of how humans have achieved the remarkable success we have. Each course focuses on a single topic or case study in order to provide more time to concentrate on the 'how do we know' question. At the same time, SI does not focus only on issues of epistemology and the philosophy of science. Instead, the course requires students to study concrete examples in order to wrestle with what each observation or experiment means (or doesn’t mean) and appreciate distinctions between scientific and non-scientific explanations.

SI has one lecture and two seminar classes each week. Lectures bridge the readings and seminar classes. They are also the chief mechanism for providing historical background and context. In Scientific Inquiry 1, seminar classes serve as forums for discussion and as ‘dry labs’ for active learning. Some time is spent clarifying questions from the reading and lecture, but the emphasis is on discussing what the evidence actually means – what are the alternative explanations and how can they be resolved or distinguished? More than half of the seminar class time is taken up by ‘dry lab’ activities in which the students work with real or contrived data to ‘discover’ something about evolutionary history. Examples include measuring skull casts to infer a time of origin for human bipedality, constructing evolutionary trees based on gene sequences, and using genetic data from the ‘1000 Genomes’ project to understand difference in the probability that they and their classmates will have particular traits.

SI 2 introduces all students to the general questions and facts of climate change through three weeks of Common Experience (CE) sessions, which are standardised lectures and seminar activities. Subsequently, each student goes into one of three Deep Inquiry (DI) tracks for parts of the semester, before rejoining their CE seminar groups for a final synthesis. In imitation of how a scientific team
functions, students will be split into teams of about six early on in the semester. The students will stay in these teams for their CE sessions, and will work together, in particular, for the synthesis portion of the course in the last three weeks. The DI tracks are chosen to de-emphasise standard disciplinary lines; they instead focus on the modes of scientific inquiry. The range of topics provides choice for students, and accommodates different faculty expertise. The three DI tracks are:

1. **Measurement and collection of data.** This focuses on lab-based and data-driven modes of inquiry, asking questions like: how does one accurately determine the level and source of atmospheric CO2 or the amount of acidification of oceans?

2. **Modeling and simulation.** This focuses on mathematical and algorithmic modes of inquiry, asking questions like: how does one discern human causes from natural causes?

3. **Effects and impact.** This focuses on ecological and environmental and environmental modes of inquiry, and asks questions like: how does one study and quantify the ecological impact?

In the synthesis weeks, students work within their CE teams on a project that pulls together the knowledge they have learned in the different DI tracks. There will be both guided in-class segments to engineer the flow and exchange of ideas, as well as independent group research opportunities. This will culminate in a final report and/or presentation.

**Readings and Course Topics**

Evolution is the centrepiece for Scientific Inquiry 1 because the evidence bearing on it is so diverse, comprising biogeography and precedence of artificial selection, fossil evidence, and recent revolutions in genetics and molecular biology. Second, the profundity and beauty of evolution as the explanation for life's diversity will enable students to deepen appreciation of life and the universe. Third, evolution is an accessible topic that does not require prior background in mathematics or science, and the fact that the selected text is written for non-scientists is intentional. Finally, evolution highlights the fundamental difference between science and myth. Evolution is a well-supported scientific discovery that is still doubted by a substantial fraction of humanity, and this skepticism is often informed by diverging views on epistemology rather than by scientific arguments. Thus, by focusing on evolution, we implicitly draw attention to the features of scientific knowledge-creation that distinguish it from the alternatives.

For SI 1, students use Jerry Coyne’s *Why Evolution is True* as a textbook. A variety of other readings, mostly from general interest magazines (two of the best are from *The New Yorker*) or from the ‘news’ sections of journals like *Science* and *Nature*, are also assigned throughout the semester. Climate change is the central topic for SI 2 because it is a clear example of how science can inform societal practices and government policies. And the ability to understand and judge the strength of evidence in the midst of the confusion of fact and fiction is a necessary skill for our students. Second, there is also general interest in the subject, but few have learned the proper science behind the evidence. Third, the study of climate change gathers evidence from many different scientific fields, and is sufficiently broad to accommodate diverse student interests and the range of expertise amongst instructors. The interweaving of many diverse threads of ideas and methods also reflects how science is done today. Finally, while SI 1 is envisioned to be about a relatively settled issue, SI 2 attempts to put those inquiry ideas to use in exploring current science where the evidence may be less clear, and climate change is an example of a topic which facts are still debated.

**Assignments & Assessment Methods**

In SI 1, the assessments and grade breakdowns are as follows:

- Participation in class: 25%
- In-class quizzes: 25%
- Short writing assignments on strength/weaknesses of various argument in favour of evolution; includes contributions to peer-grading: 20%
- Miscellaneous assignments: 10%
- Final Exam: 20%
- In-Class debate (ungraded)

In SI 2, students are assessed on the basis of weekly assignments, midterm and final exams, and a final project report or presentation.
Modern Social Thought

This course introduces students to some of the foundational figures of modern social thought and explores ways in which their writings have been taken up in contemporary social analysis and political practice in different parts of the world. The course also grapples with several other modern developments including the feminist revolution and the provicialising of European understandings of society and modernity articulated in anticolonial and postcolonial thought and practice.

Course Objectives

Modern Social Thought builds upon the Comparative Social Inquiry, Quantitative Reasoning, and Philosophy and Political Thought modules. Students in this course will:

• Understand competing theories of major social trends in the modern world and be able to trace the influence of these theories on actual political movements.
• Recognise that it is possible to view the social world through different theoretical lenses.
• Develop a sense of the ethical implications of each theoretical lens.

Pedagogy

Students begin the course by considering the social as an object of scientific analysis, governmental action, and popular imaginings. They then dive into a series of units, each asking them to grapple with a specific social theorist or social theoretical tradition. Lectures will provide conceptual and substantive pathways through the ideas of these key thinkers and traditions, while seminars will offer the opportunity to read texts closely and discuss them at length.

Students in this course will contrast classic social theory with various understandings of modernity, history, and the human condition that can be found in postcolonial thought. Students will also weigh the growing importance of quantitative analysis in the study of society. Finally, unlike many courses on similar topics, this course will ask students to consider not only social theory, but also the ways in which social theoretical ideas have shaped actual ideological practices and politics.

Course Topics & Readings

Part I: The Rise of the Social, The Notion of the Modern
Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History
Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America
Alexis de Tocqueville, Writings on Empire and Slavery
Declarations of the Rights of Man and Woman, Citizens, States, and Peoples

Part II: Marx, Weber, Durkheim
Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, “The German Ideology”
Karl Marx, Capital
Dadabhai Naoroji, “Poverty and Un-British Rule in India (1901)”, “The Condition of India”.
Emile Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society
Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism
Max Weber, “Science as Vocation” and “Politics as Vocation” from Essays in Sociology

Part III: Modernities
Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex
Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth
Mohandas K. Ghandi, Hind Swaraj and Other Writings
Mohandas K. Ghandi, “Why I regard the British Rule as a Curse”
Herbert George Wells, Guide to the New World: A Handbook of Constructive World Revolution
Ashis Nandy, The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism
Hu Shih, “The Life of Mr. Chabudo”
Ho Chi Minh, 1945, “Declaration of Independence, Democratic Republic of Vietnam”
Selections of speeches and writings by Lee Kuan Yew, Zhou En Lai, Sukarno
Michel Foucault, History of Sexuality
Joan Scott, “Symptomatic Politics: The Banning of Islamic Head Scarves in French Public Schools”
Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”
Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?”
Chakrabarty, Dipesh, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference
Guha, Ranajit. “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”, Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society
Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, “Singapore: Global City”, The Prophetic and the Political
Arjun Appadurai, “Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics”

Assignments & Assessment Methods

There are common writing assignments in this course which constitute 80% of the grade. Seminar participation constitutes the remaining 20%.

Historical Immersion

Most Common Curriculum courses range widely across space and times, with each focusing on a particular way of understanding the world and teaches a particular set of skills. Historical Immersion courses, in contrast, focus on a particular historical moment. These courses slow down the chronological speed at which students are expected to operate, allowing for greater depth as students dive into what was happening in a specific place and time. Each course provides an opportunity to bring together intellectual abilities learned in previous Common Curriculum courses. The conjunction of these abilities helps us to develop a sympathetic imagination for historical moments other than our own.

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Make use of different sorts of evidence to construct their own understandings of the past: archives, oral interviews, diaries, monuments, everyday objects, pamphlets, diaries, weapons, and more.
- Understand how historical facts, memories, and myths are constructed and how one event can produce many narratives
- Use different tools to sort through these competing interpretations
- Reflect on broader questions about the extent to which truth about the past is accessible to us
- Understand how the construction of histories reflect contemporary concerns and values of historians

Pedagogy

Although their topics vary, all Historical Immersion courses are designed to help students acquire a deep knowledge of a particular time and place. Students will consider each topic in its historical context, investigating how the contingencies of particular moments and decisions converged with broader social forces into a particular train of events. Why did certain changes occur? Why did others fail to occur? Students ask and answer these questions while looking through the lens provided by our own circumstances. In doing so, they not only try to make
sense of past events, practices, and peoples but are forced to reflect on our own concerns and values. Each course will be premised upon the idea that history is not simply the study of factual data about the past. History consists of the stories that particular people tell about the past; it is a dialogue between the past and the present, an ongoing conversation among people in different times and places trying to make sense of their own world by understanding its origins. Therefore, reading histories not only helps us describe and analyse past events, societies, and peoples; it also reflects the concerns and values of the historians themselves.

Historical Immersion courses are taught in seminar fashion, most often by a single faculty member but sometimes by a team bringing different perspectives to bear on the historical moment in question.

Course Topics and Readings

The following are examples of courses that students can take to fulfill the Historical Immersion requirement of the Common Curriculum.

The Age of Augustus

This course examines a watershed moment in Roman history: the fall of the republic and the emergence of a monarchy under the first emperor, Augustus. Students will assess the self-destructive civil wars that led to Augustus’s rise as warlord, and his consolidation of power over the Roman city-state and empire. How did Augustus achieve the compromises that enabled him to retain monarchical power and establish a dynasty that lasted almost a century (33 BCE–68 CE)? Our investigation will engage primary sources including archaeological and textual materials: public and private inscriptions, visual arts and architecture, and poetic and historiographical texts of the Augustan period and beyond. These primary sources, supplemented with some secondary literature, will shape our understanding of how Romans redefined their sense of society and history over the course of Augustus’ reign. How might Augustus’ Roman Revolution be relevant to a Singaporean sense of political and ideological history?

Nietzsche and his Time

In the 1880s, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God and called for a new life-affirming philosophy to combat the rise of nihilism. Nietzsche, one of the most provocative thinkers of the latter half of the nineteenth century, lived in an age of cultural tumult and intellectual transformation, a time of ideas and ideologies that continue to shape how we understand the world today. This course offers a window into this period through a close engagement with Nietzsche’s writings, including his philosophical works, personal correspondence, and highly idiosyncratic autobiography, Ecce Homo. Particular attention is paid to his friendship and subsequent disillusionment with the composer Richard Wagner, whose operas are also studied.

Geometry and the Emergence of Perspective

Artists of the Italian Renaissance were profoundly influenced by the geometers of ancient Greece. In his seminal treatise, On Painting, Leon Battista Alberti explains how he drew on their works to explain the art of painting according to the basic principles of nature. This course aims to understand Alberti’s idea by studying the emergence of perspective drawing from the standpoint of Euclidean geometry. It explores how formalising perspective drawing led to a new approach to geometry in seventeenth-century Europe. Students acquire some basic geometrical knowledge by reading selected chapters from Euclid’s Elements, adapting selected propositions and proofs into a modern vernacular. They move on to a careful study of Alberti’s treatise, supplemented with selections from Giorgio Vasari’s Lives of the Artists, Giotto di Bondone’s Madonna Enthroned, Filippo Brunelleschi’s panels of the Florence Baptistery of St. John, and Piero Della Francesca’s On Perspective for Painting. The investigation culminates with a recreation of Girard Desargues’ synthesis of Euclid’s and Alberti’s works, which motivated the invention of projective (non-Euclidean) geometry. Each student writes a research paper on a further interaction between geometry and art during the Renaissance, such as the geometry used by a particular artist or architect, or a geometric interpretation of a single work. The main requirement is that students create narratives that enrich their understanding and historical sensibility.

Assignments and Assessment Methods

Assignments and assessment vary between Historical Immersion courses.
Lessons from the Common Curriculum
Introduction

During the academic years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017, then CTL Director Bryan Penprase conducted a series of interviews with the Common Curriculum facilitators to find out how the courses are structured and what lessons have been learned from the team-taught character of these courses.

As explained in the preceding chapter, Yale-NUS College in Singapore has an innovative Common Curriculum that is intended to provide all of its undergraduates extensive experience in a variety of interdisciplinary and team-taught courses. These courses include the following courses which students take in their first and second years:

**First-year courses:** Quantitative Reasoning (1 semester), Scientific Inquiry (1 semester), Philosophy and Political Thought 1 & 2 (2 semesters), Literature and Humanities 1 & 2 (2 semesters).

**Second-year courses:** Modern Social Thought (1 semester), Scientific Inquiry 2 (1 semester)

In most Common Curriculum courses, students meet in a weekly lecture and two seminar sessions. The lectures involve the entire class of Yale-NUS, now approaching 250 students, while the seminar sessions are broken into discussion groups of 18 or fewer students. In each course a facilitator leads a team of instructors and is responsible for coordinating the sections, maintaining some consistency in assignments and expectations between sections, and sharing strategies for teaching particular topics. In this way, the teaching teams are small “learning organisations” with the shared intellectual goal of providing new multidisciplinary courses. This unique teaching and learning environment has enabled Yale-NUS College to develop a remarkable teaching culture where faculty are continuously discussing teaching together, sharing pedagogical strategies, and also teaching each other. We wanted to explore what pedagogical lessons have been learned, and how the teaching teams have been able to find solutions to the inevitable tension between disciplinary expertise and independent teaching. We also seek to find out how they balance the need to span multiple disciplines and create a common experience within the course.

Methodology

To explore the ways in which teaching teams each have developed unique cultures, and the lessons learned by each team in building the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum, I conducted structured interviews with a cross-section of Common Curriculum course facilitators across nearly all of the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum courses. The list of facilitators consulted for this study with the courses for which they were responsible and the years in which they facilitated the courses is given below. In addition, the author, as facilitator of Foundations of Science, a course that has been replaced by Scientific Inquiry 2, has provided answers to the same questions regarding that earlier course. We were able to reach the facilitators of all the Common Curriculum courses in the Natural Sciences, and several facilitators in some of the other courses, to explore how those courses changed from year to year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitators</th>
<th>CC Course</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jon Berrick</td>
<td>Quantitative Reasoning (QR)</td>
<td>2013 - 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaffique Adam</td>
<td>Integrated Science (IS)</td>
<td>2013 - 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan Penprase</td>
<td>Foundations of Science (FoS)</td>
<td>2015 - 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber Carpenter</td>
<td>Philosophical and Political Thought 1 (PPT 1)</td>
<td>2015 - 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steven Green</td>
<td>Literature and Humanities 1 (KH1)</td>
<td>2015 - 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry Nardin</td>
<td>Philosophical and Political Thought 2 (PPT 2)</td>
<td>2015 - 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Alter</td>
<td>Modern Social Thought (MST)</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina Tarnopolsky</td>
<td>Modern Social Thought (MST)</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each interview included questions (listed below) that were designed to identify the innovations and “signature pedagogies” developed within each teaching team. The interview also aimed to identify challenges within the interdisciplinary team-teaching environment and how they were met, and the degree to which the various sections were able to provide a common experience. In nearly all cases, the teaching teams structured their courses to allow for some flexibility and differentiation in activities and assessments. Other challenges were faced in ensuring reasonably consistent grading across sections and instructors, and many of the facilitators described what
they did to achieve this consistency. A final question was intended to offer to other institutions a set of key “take-aways” from the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum that they might be able to adopt in their own institutions.

Structured interview questions for CC facilitators
1. What are some of your most exciting and effective assignments?
2. What would you describe as the “signature pedagogy” or main method of teaching within your course?
3. What are some of the high points for you and your team in your Common Curriculum course?
4. What were some of the main problems you and your team encountered that would not arise in an individually taught course?
5. How did you fix those problems?
6. Which problems still need a solution?
7. In what ways has team teaching in your course enhanced the quality of the course assessments and student learning?
8. What fraction of the assessments in your course are truly common in the sense that they are completed by all students?
9. What fraction of the assessments in your course are designed and graded individually by the section instructors?
10. What are the costs and benefits for having completely common assignments in your course?
11. What are the costs and benefits for having individually designed and graded assignments in your course?
12. What are some of the most useful parts of your Yale-NUS course that you think other institutions should adopt?

Results from facilitator interviews

Part 1: Signature Pedagogies

The first three questions highlight the successes and “signature pedagogies” that were developed within the teaching teams, as well as innovations in structuring assignments and encouraging engaged discussions in the classroom. We describe each of these innovations for each Common Curriculum course, and summarise common themes of these successes within each course.

In the initial years, Scientific Inquiry (SI) was a one-semester course. The course facilitator from those years, Martin Weissman, described one of main accomplishments of SI as being able to see many of the topics from the student’s point of view because all the instructors were required to teach material that was outside their areas of specialisation and even their disciplines. Within the course an exercise using the cosmic distance ladder was felt to be quite effective. In this exercise, students assemble each of the components of the distance scale and then combine their calculations to measure the extent of the universe. Within that assignment, there was also a chance to discuss error analysis and the systematic error within the calculations. The SI team also developed a poster project in which students visually described a scientific discovery; this allowed for a dynamic group experience in presenting science. Additional innovations included debates on cosmology in class – which allowed for discussion of historical perspectives in science and allowed students to experience the process of actually doing science.

The disciplines covered in SI in the early years spanned biology, physics and astrophysics. Class activities included simulations and visualisations of evolutionary biology, and students even made a board game with blue and white marbles which simulated how genes transmit traits in organisms.

During the first three years of the Foundations of Science (FOS) course, the signature pedagogy was a “deep dive” into a disciplinary subject, which included a case study in a scientific discipline for five to six weeks followed by a common experience segment that took different forms in each of the first three years of the course. The disciplinary case studies were chosen to embody key principles in the science discussed, and in each of the units, the instructors were able to create an “authentic learning environment” (Lombardi, 2007) in which students could design...
their own research questions, use scientific literature, and conduct experiments. The hybrid common/elective structure was an interesting experience and one that the teaching team found to be effective in allowing instructors to teach in their own disciplines while also providing a common experience through end-of-semester “Grand Challenge” projects with a poster fair, an interdisciplinary field excursion, or a detailed scientific project.

The Quantitative Reasoning (QR) course was able to provide several exciting and innovative assessments based on the technique known as Team Based Learning or TBL (Michaelson and Sweet, 2008). The teaching team uses a flipped classroom approach, with discussions in class mixed with innovative assessments. The TBL pedagogy also included readiness assurance tests (RATs) at the beginning of each class, surveys that provided students a chance to practise some of the statistical techniques discussed in class, and exercises involving critical analysis of popular media programmes that included quantitative information, such as the local TV series "It Figures." The QR team was also able to provide R programming skills and confidence. Team members felt that they were able to engage students so that a large number of them began to enjoy quantitative problems for their intellectual rigour.

In another course in the early years, Integrated Science (IS), parts of which have since been folded into Scientific Inquiry 2, the team of five instructors was able to provide a dynamic and integrated science introduction for science majors, the disciplines of Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology, and Physics. A series of discussions about water provided a theme uniting all the disciplines in the first semester IS course. Water was discussed as a solution to a partial differential equation by the mathematician, as an embodiment of Newton’s laws in a continuum by the physicist, as revolving around well-constructed lectures and seminars that complemented each other. Alter stated that “these big lectures work in synchrony with the seminar structure” because “students can draw on the seminar to facilitate discussion, and the lecture material helps to contextualise the readings that are then done in great depth.” The MST teaching team would “work intensively with a team on a weekly basis, digging through... complex theoretical, analytical ideas, unpacking texts, doing close reading as a team, and discussing that in a way that was structured by the overarching project that we’re all involved in,” according to Alter. This resulted in carefully crafted essay prompts, which “reflected this kind of inter-disciplinary perspective on social problems and social thought.” Alter described how some of the sections would use a mixed pedagogy in which a group of three or four students would be tasked with giving a short presentation and then taking charge of the section discussion.

Our interview with the facilitator for the Literature and Humanities courses (LH 1 and LH 2) identified a number of exciting pedagogies within this course, pedagogies that have been refined over the years. One of the instructors and first facilitators, Mira Seo, assigned the roles of “Time Lords” (to provide the class with a brief historical and cultural context for the text under discussion) and “Discussants” (to organise the agenda and lead the class discussion). Various ways of extending the responsibilities of students into leadership and other active roles were further developed in each of the LH 1 and LH 2 sections. Some of the instructors used “active learning” and online polling systems during the lectures to make those lectures more active and engaging. The entire teaching team also invented new ways to tie the texts into the students’ lives. One example of this was an exercise in which students brought to class objects that was linked to the text being discussed, and explained how the object and text were connected. The LH 1 facilitator, Steven Green, described how within the teaching team “nobody is an expert on everything,” which means that “there is an opportunity for everyone to learn, and a greater sense of the shared journey with the students through the texts.” Green describes how by the end of the term “you really have journeyed” and “grown” with the students.

We discussed the Modern Social Thought (MST) and Philosophy and Political Thought (PPT) courses with MST facilitators Joseph Alter and Christina Tarnopolsky, and PPT facilitators Amber Carpenter and Terry Nardin. Alter described the pedagogy in MST as revolving around well-constructed lectures and seminars that complemented each other. Alter stated that “these big lectures work in synchrony with the seminar structure” because “students can draw on the seminar to facilitate discussion, and the lecture material helps to contextualise the readings that are then done in great depth.” The MST teaching team would "work intensively with a team on a weekly basis, digging through... complex theoretical, analytical ideas, unpacking texts, doing close reading as a team, and discussing that in a way that was structured by the overarching project that we’re all involved in," according to Alter. This resulted in carefully crafted essay prompts, which “reflected this kind of inter-disciplinary perspective on social problems and social thought.” Alter described how some of the sections would use a mixed pedagogy in which a group of three or four students would be tasked with giving a short presentation and then taking charge of the section discussion.
Christina Tarnopolsky, the incoming facilitator of MST, also pointed to the midterm exam as a key pedagogical element. The midterm was effective for two reasons: the students had to synthesise and think across the main social theorists, and also set themselves up for two things in the second half of the course: to criticize these perspectives and to prepare for further courses in the social sciences. The midterm enabled students to consolidate their knowledge of key terms and concepts from Marx, Weber, Durkheim. Tarnopolsky also reports one effective assignment in MST was a Common Curriculum “interdisciplinary reflection piece” that asked for a comparison between a figure from one of the MST works, and another figure from a different Common Curriculum course, with a written discussion of how they are united. Tarnopolsky noted that the pedagogy within MST took two main approaches. About half of sections within MST would alternate leadership within the two discussion sections each week between the professor and a group of students. The other half of the sections would employ a group-based report pedagogy, where students in groups would work on answers to questions, and then a selected student would be responsible for reporting the findings of the group. Tarnopolsky is quite happy with how MST has evolved to become a truly unique course, one in which the first half of the course is quite close to what other modern social thought courses do around the world, but in the second half includes critical perspectives from all across the world – not just Western viewpoints. This shift in the second half causes “lights to go on” for both students and faculty and provides an exciting learning experience.

Amber Carpenter, facilitator of the first of the two Philosophy and Political Thought courses (PPT 1), notes that one strength of the course is in the diversity of the kinds of texts students read, which is greater than traditional philosophy or political thought courses. Carpenter describes how this approach is unique: “So not only Plato’s dialogues in contrast with Aristotle’s treatises, but the anecdotes of Mengzi, the analogies of the Milindapañha, the meditations of Marcus Aurelius (or, in other years, letters of Epicurus), the commentaries of Ramanuja and Sankara on the poetry of the Bhagavad-Gita … are all modes in which philosophy and political thought can happen.” She believes that “learning how to deal with this variety of texts, and using this variety of texts in these topics, counts as a pedagogical innovation.”

Terry Nardin, the facilitator of the second semester of Philosophy and Political Thought (PPT 2), described the PPT teaching teams as “taking writing across the curriculum seriously,” explaining that the PPT 1 and PPT 2 teams worked hard to “scaffold our assignments” with “very clear learning goals for each paper.” The pedagogy intentionally varies the writing assignments to develop different writing skills. These assignments start with asking students to “interpret some small part of the text and to be able to substantiate that interpretation with data from the text, often in the form of quotations” and then moves to progressively longer and more demanding assignments that “engage in a complex dialectic where they’re taking a position and defending it against objections.” PPT 1 and PPT 2 build toward longer papers and more complex prompts to develop sophistication in the student’s writing and reasoning. Nardin also described exercises where, for example, students would be asked to imagine a common object that changes form – such as a piece of chewing gum – and then asked whether this object was the same object after being subjected to some changes as it was before. These discussions, rooted in common experience, are designed to help students think about abstractions such as “the nature of reality” by starting with concrete things and then working with more abstract concepts such as “extension, location, and duration in time.”

Another of the facilitators, Carpenter, described how PPT 1 spends four weeks on Chinese, four weeks on Greek and four weeks on Indian literature. She sees this as a unique feature of the course, one that invites students to “reflect on the practices of independent intellectual traditions that developed independently.” This “teaches students to be intellectuals who can integrate these traditions.” Carpenter notes that this “civilisational approach, which treats each of the philosophical traditions in turn, sets us up to work on integrating the traditions into a single conversation in PPT 2, when we interleave the traditions across the semester.”

Part 2: Challenges, Problems and Solutions

The next three questions focused on problems faced by each teaching team and how they were solved. These responses are organised by course and indicate some of the themes and challenges that are likely to arise in team-taught interdisciplinary courses that bring together ideas from the humanities, and the social and natural sciences.

The Scientific Inquiry (SI) Course facilitator, Martin Weissman, described some of the challenges that arise from teaching outside of one’s own discipline, employing new modes of instruction from what most faculty experienced as students. Weissman stated “it’s a very challenging course for our faculty because its different, people are
teaching outside of the discipline. But also the mode of instruction is different too, so that's kind of a double hit for new instructors." The solution to this issue is to take significant time before class starts, and to provide careful monitoring during the course, according to Weissman. Jon Berrick, facilitator from Quantitative Reasoning (QR) cites student anxiety arising from variations within sections, and a large amount of bookkeeping for the teaching team arising from so many points of assessment as two challenging areas. These problems are “inevitable” according to Berrick, and necessary since “so much of the assessment is standardised.” Berrick is grateful for the hard work within the QR team, which required team members to take on a range of tasks, and he also acknowledges excellent support from the Educational Resources and Technology (ERT) division at Yale-NUS.

Shaffique Adam, facilitator of Integrated Science (IS), cites different levels of math preparation as one of the challenges faced within IS. Despite nearly all of the students having Advance Placement calculus or equivalent, the range of actual facility in mathematics was extremely large. Another issue in the course was that many students had different levels of preparation for and interest in the various science disciplines discussed. This caused some of the students who were mainly interested in Biology to become disengaged when Physics was discussed, and vice versa.

A major challenge in Foundations of Science (FOS) was the wide range of teaching styles and approaches to assessment within the teaching team. Since each of the “disciplinary case studies” continued for five or six weeks, significant disparities in the expectations and experiences within FOS limited the amount of common experience in the course. The teaching team tried to integrate the different case studies with exercises in the last weeks of the semester, such as a Grand Challenge project. These exercises enabled students to apply what they had learned within the various disciplines into an interdisciplinary context. Future versions of the Yale-NUS second-Year science course known as SI 2 will feature a similar three-week integrative experience at the end of the semester that will allow students to apply what they have learned in a six-week Deep Inquiry.

Some of the challenges encountered in Literature and Humanities involved the diversity of the material covered in the course. As Steven Green explains, “because nobody is an expert on everything, it takes more time for the tutor to gain sufficient expertise to feel confident in the front of the class.” Carpenter confirms this as a challenge in her course as well, and states that “you need to have people on the team who are invested in and familiar with the philosophical and intellectual traditions that we’re working with.” Carpenter states that the key to “making it work is that everybody has to be committed to working outside their area and to the good of students learning all these things.”

Regarding the MST course, Alter points to simple “practical issues” as posing the biggest challenge, such as developing and staging the midterm exam that was added in the second year of the course. Tarnopolsky describes some of the key challenges in MST arising from different approaches to grading, which can vary significantly by instructor. The MST team addresses this issue by recalibrating grades – with multiple instructors reading papers to provide more consistency in the resulting marks. Within the PPT course, Terry Nardin recalled that some of the biggest challenges came from working with texts from authors from non-Western cultures outside of an instructor’s training. An example was working with an Indian logic text from about 1000 CE. However, Nardin also states that “I found it interesting and very useful to move into those texts with ideas that are in my career wholly shaped by western materials and seeing similarities and differences and seeing things chopped up in a different way.” These challenges also became high points in the course, according to Nardin.

Part 3: Common Experience and Consistency within Sections

The final set of questions focused on the degree to which each Common Curriculum course was structured to provide a common experience across all the sections. We wanted to explore how the tension between common experience and instructor autonomy was resolved across the various courses. Many discussions across Yale-NUS College in the first four years centered on the issue of how best to provide a common experience for our students, while leveraging the specialised expertise of the instructors. It also is the case that some degree of variability within sections, especially within the early years of a Common Curriculum course, can enable development of experimental exercises and assignments that can then be more broadly used within the teaching team. We describe how each teaching team found solutions and compromises to these issues in the following section.
Within the science division, there was a diverse spectrum of approaches toward balancing the need for a common experience with the desire to provide an authentic experience of discipline-based science. Within Scientific Inquiry, nearly all the assessments and activities were common to the various sections and the team worked hard to provide an identical set of quizzes and exercises within each section. As described by SI facilitator Martin Weissman, “I think it brings people together in different sections; it makes students get a bit uncomfortable when every seminar group has their own assessments.” Weissman also noted that “the natural force of things pulls the course apart; every instructor has their own style and way to present things.” In the first year, this force resulted in some SI seminar groups that “went rogue” - which in some cases caused problems but in others improved the experience in one or two sections.

The FOS course took nearly an opposite approach from SI, with each instructor providing a disciplinary case study of their own field – in the language of that field and employing disciplinary methodologies in more depth. The advantage of the FOS approach is that the level of authority of the instructors was higher because they were teaching within their areas of expertise. This approach however gave very disparate experiences within FOS and provided a mix of levels of difficulty and sophistication, which the later version of SI 2 attempts to address. SI 2 will include a six-week “Deep Inquiry” segment (much like the FOS case study) but scaffolding this disciplinary component with a larger period of common experience at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester.

The IS course in the first semester circumvented the problems of aligning different sections because the entire class met together with the five instructors in the teaching team in each class session. Since all the instructors and students were together throughout the course, the IS1 course provided a truly common experience for all of the teaching team and students. And because the IS1 team represented many different disciplines, the team divided some of the grading within the course so that Physics experts would grade questions in that subject and those in Math would grade math exercises, and in this way all the students would receive consistent grading for assignments in the course.

Quantitative Reasoning has common assessments, and weekly meetings to assure consistency across the various sections. However, “each instructor has discretion over 10% of marks that are given to student participation,” according to QR facilitator Jon Berrick.

Providing consistency within different sections posed similar challenges in Common Curriculum courses in humanities and social sciences. As PPT facilitator Amber Carpenter notes, “these texts are incredibly rich and we could not as a group possibly agree on which connections are most fruitful.” Carpenter elaborated by stating, “we do not see providing consistency as an overriding aim, certainly not if that implies homogeneity, or there being one ‘right’ way … through this material; of course, threads through these texts, and ways of approaching them, are going to differ between seminar-leaders – and so much the better.” Terry Nardin notes that the team-taught character of the PPT course provides both challenges and benefits: “we're pooling expertise so we're helping each other out. It's completely cooperative. We have experts in these texts, and without their guidance many of us would be completely adrift.”

The PPT teaching team decided to allow for some flexibility in discussions and assessments, but only after discussing the salient features extensively as a group. This mixed approach allows for each instructor to make “different kinds of connections according to what we've emphasised in the other texts and our way of going about it” according to Carpenter. The lectures in PPT provide a common sounding board for the texts and their discussion as well. Carpenter described how “if the lecturer sees something, they call attention to it and then we know that everyone has been exposed” to discussion points for individual sections. Carpenter explained how 60% of the grade in the PPT course was based on common essays, with 40% based on seminar performance, which individual instructors were able to customise with different essay prompts based on the same set of common texts. Nardin described how the combined essay prompts are “set by the section instructions in keeping with a template” that provided “learning goals of each paper.” The remaining assessments are “more free” according to Nardin, and “people make up their own assignments and they're quite diverse.” The PPT 2 grade also includes a 5% component for a “Symposium” in which students make oral presentations based on something they've learned in the course.

Green and the LH team also adopted a 60%/40% rule and noted that there is a wide range of activities within the 40% section grade from one section to another,
a mix of assessed blog writing, attendance and participation, and other in-class group activities. This compromise of individualised section activities has mixed benefits and costs. According to Green, equity concerns are important: “It is at least possible that some students would perform better in another section, where the tutor’s activities align more with the student's own learning style and strengths” But Green also acknowledged that the diversity of approaches provides benefits and that he “wouldn’t want to lose the really good points that individuals bring to it.”

The MST course has a common set of readings and assessments, but uses a mix of pedagogical approaches chosen by individual section instructors. MST facilitator Joseph Alter felt strongly about having common assessments, noting that “the benefit is that it does exactly what I think the Common Curriculum is designed to do, which is to extend the common experience of learning into the assessment, which reinforces the intellectual integrity of the course.” Alter stated that this benefit of common experience is worth the cost, which he described as “just logistical problems.” Alter noted that MST had an 80%/20% breakdown, where 80% of the assignments were common. Common assignments were graded by section instructors, with sample of those papers checked by other instructors to “assure consistency in the nature of the assignments and the grading process.” The 20% differentiation allowed for some instructors to try new approaches in their sections, which provided a compromise between common experience and instructor autonomy. Christina Tarnopolsky noted that in subsequent years the MST course retained this 80% common assessment in the form of two term papers and a midterm, but with some flexibility in the two term papers. Tarnopolsky described how the teaching team would “share our essay prompts two weeks before we hand out the essays” but allowed for differences in the exact essays, with some professors adopting common keywords and others borrowing but modifying essay prompts. The 20% of the grade was described by Tarnopolsky as “participation that’s left up to the instructor to decide.”

Summary and Conclusions

During our discussion with CC facilitators, we explored how each of these courses had been developed after years of hard work, discussion, and compromise within their respective teaching teams. The challenge of finding the appropriate mix of texts, assessments, and pedagogical approaches has left a legacy that represents a common intellectual property of the Yale-NUS faculty and students. Both the students and faculty were able to grow substantially from the process of development of the Common Curriculum in the early years, and the resulting Common Curriculum is a tribute to this intense intellectual collaboration across teaching teams and between faculty and students. From this effort, our facilitators have identified several aspects of the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum that might be adapted by other universities and colleges. The experiments within the Science Division have generated a wide range of approaches to interdisciplinary science education that range from an intense team-taught majors course to a first-semester exploration of how scientists know things are true. Years of effort have developed innovative laboratory exercises in SI, FOS, and IS, and the science courses universally employ active learning within sections as well as new approaches to blending disciplines using project-based learning (such as the FOS Grand Challenge and IS laboratory exercises). These courses are all worth further study and adaptation in other contexts. The conclusion from the Yale-NUS Science Division is that the new Common Curriculum course SI 2 will employ a hybrid approach that mixes a “deep inquiry” with “common experience” segments, and the tight alignment of section instructors is designed to deliver the best compromise between disciplinary expertise and common experience.

Steven Green, LH facilitator, notes that unlike most Great Works courses in Europe or the US, the Common Curriculum courses “actually do have a proper global cultural focus.” This curriculum is “not just global but also directly relevant to Singapore” and “is not found elsewhere and gives you literacy into this part of the world.” Green notes that other great works courses “could benefit from becoming more globalised.” Amber Carpenter, PPT facilitator, goes further and states that “what we’re trying to do is to integrate the practices of intellectual traditions that developed independently, to teach students to be intellectuals who can integrate these traditions – we have to do that.”
MST facilitator Joseph Alter claims that the Yale-NUS Common curriculum “expresses a kind of vision for modernity in Asia that is different from the vision for modernity within the framework of European intellectual traditions.” Tarnopolsky notes that MST “is the first truly global modern social thought course offered that I don’t think you can find that in North America.” Nardin, PPT 2 facilitator notes that “I think the most important thing is teaching philosophy and political theory using non-Western texts.” Nardin notes that “if you’re really taking seriously the notion that politics is something that occurs in different places and is understood in different ways, the only way to do it is to actually dig into the representative texts of these different traditions.” Nardin feels that this is “fundamental to liberal education” because “part of becoming a more educated person is to take things that are distant and strange in space, from other parts of the world and in time from the past including the ancient past.” Nardin believes that the PPT course gives “a much deeper, much richer sense of the scope and possibilities of these disciplines than someone who’s just read modern European theory.”

Another unique aspect of the Yale-NUS Common curriculum is how it creates tightly knit teaching teams in which faculty are able to share disciplinary perspectives across a wide variety of texts and topics, and create a new kind of environment for both interpreting the intellectual terrain of the course, and approaches to teaching. As described by PPT 1 facilitator, Amber Carpenter, “Because of the team meetings and the sharing - sharing approaches to texts and intellectual problems as well as to working with students - there is tremendous opportunity for genuine and effective peer support for teaching, and for each to improve their teaching.” Carpenter notes that “being part of the PPT teaching team is not only the single most effective thing in improving my teaching that I’ve gone through – it is nearly the only thing I’ve encountered that actually helped me improve my teaching more than my own trial-and-error-plus-reflection-on-the-same.” This exploration in interpretation and pedagogy is one of the many benefits provided by the team-taught courses of the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum and is a key feature of the emerging teaching culture at Yale-NUS College.

The results of the first four years of the Yale-NUS College Common Curriculum provide a new model for undergraduate education and we hope that these “lessons learned” can be applied at other institutions. We are grateful to our teams of Yale-NUS instructors working diligently over many years to refine each of the courses to their present state. The result of the years of effort on our Yale-NUS Common Curriculum have provided a unique experience for students which blends disciplines and cultures like no other curriculum in the world, and we look forward to watching the future evolution of this unique curriculum.

Works Cited

Student Voices on the Common Curriculum

Joanna Lee, Dean’s Fellow, Yale-NUS CTL
Introduction

Students play a critical role in creating the academic culture at Yale-NUS. Reflections on the Common Curriculum were collected from students and provide insight into how the Common Curriculum contributes to the student academic experience. Students were asked how the Common Curriculum has affected their college experience, and whether they felt the Common Curriculum was effective in enhancing their academic experiences.

This chapter identifies some key themes that emerge from these reflections, which include both contributions to their learning as well as the challenges faced by both students and faculty.

Contributions to Learning

Exposure to a range of disciplines and modes of thinking

Many students cited an exposure to other modes of thinking and disciplines outside their area of interest as a striking benefit of the Common Curriculum. For many students, this exemplified the spirit of liberal arts as they were exposed to ideas, knowledge and disciplinary methods beyond the areas of interest or specialty they had developed during their education prior. Some explicitly stated that if not for the Common Curriculum, they were unlikely to venture into disciplines outside of their comfort zone on their own accord, and therefore recognised the value of the Common Curriculum in enforcing exposure to various disciplines.

“I think the Common Curriculum did broaden my perspectives quite a lot.” – Student from the Class of 2020, Mathematical, Computational and Statistical Sciences

“I’ve learnt a lot through the Common Curriculum, it has helped me think in several different ways.” – Student from the Class of 2017, Psychology

“I remember taking Philosophy and Political Thought 2 and experiencing how thinkers like Rousseau and Nietzsche animated my imagination. Literature and Humanities taught me to see the text and find meaning, while Scientific Inquiry pushed me to think about the process of science—of asking questions and designing methods to find answers. In other words, the Common Curriculum as a whole encouraged me to explore, to be curious, to be hungry.” – Student from the Class of 2017, PPE

“I think it was great that I was exposed to texts and thinkers I could scarcely imagine myself picking up otherwise.” – Student from the Class of 2017, Environmental Studies

“The Common Curriculum is a place for me to explore academic areas that are necessary for my growth as a student. Although these areas are outside my interest area, it is still important for me to be familiar with them. It has changed the way I think about philosophy and the way I perceive the world. Philosophical questioning has led me to re-evaluate the things that I think are true about the world and how I deal with them.” – Student from the Class of 2020, Environmental Studies

‘The Common Curriculum meant everything to me. Coming from an educational system with literally zero attention given to critical thinking, I was mind-blown by the ideas and opportunities offered by the CC. It was my first introduction to critical thinking, and I found the experience life-changing and incredibly exciting.’ – Student from the Class of 2017, Anthropology

“I’ve learnt a lot through the Common Curriculum, it has helped me think in several different ways.” – Student from the Class of 2017, Psychology
Notably, students also saw a direct relationship between being exposed to a range of disciplines and developing a broad range of thinking skills and approaches to learning. This demonstrates that the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum has successfully exposed them different modes of thinking.

“The Common Curriculum has served to broaden my knowledge, by compelling me to engage with subjects that I previously felt uninterested in, or have a lesser degree of knowledge about. In particular, I find that it has helped me to be more ready to engage with scientific subjects, coming from a background of studies with a lesser emphasis on these areas.”
– Student from the Class of 2020, Major undeclared

“Before college, I was horrible at maths and hated science, but now I hold a physics research assistant position. I believe very strongly in the value and need to preserve and continue refining the Common Curriculum, especially the aspect of Science. This belief relates to the fact that I have seen (both in myself and my peers) how the structure and role of the Common Curriculum can deeply alter the way one learns and what they choose to learn, when approached with the right attitude and inclination.”
– Student from the Class of 2019, Physical Science

“I really enjoyed the Common Curriculum, especially those dabbing in the social sciences and humanities. It was a great introduction to all these areas which I have barely been exposed to before coming to college... it really introduced me to a lot of areas of interest and also professors who I wouldn’t have met or had the chance to interact with had it not been for the Common Curriculum.”
– Student from the Class of 2019, Environmental Studies

### Laying foundational skills and knowledge

Students also saw the role of the Common Curriculum in laying foundation skills and knowledge necessary for their education. For many students, these foundations also played a critical role in their major selection. Some stated that sampling various disciplines in the Common Curriculum informed their major decisions – some even shared that they would not have selected their major if not for exposure to it through the Common Curriculum. Other students saw the skills and knowledge gained as broadly relevant to a liberal arts education, and could see their relevance across majors.

“The Common Curriculum is why I chose to major in Philosophy, Politics and Economics despite being a science student... I know that I am the scientist I am today because of the Common Curriculum that informs the way I think and approach problems.”
– Student from the Class of 2017, Philosophy, Politics & Economics

“The Common Curriculum literally transformed my life trajectory. I came into Yale-NUS fully prepared to major in Literature (and maybe minor in Arts-Hum), with the intention to pursue the academia track and solely focus on writing/research in literary studies. My secondary focus was geared towards the social sciences (specifically GA and Anthro). The Common Curriculum, however, showed me how wrong I was about all this! While my love for Lit continued, I also developed a passion for Physics after having exposure through meeting science professors/content through SI.”
– Student from the Class of 2019, Physical Science

“One of the benefits is a broad base of content that I am familiar with, ranging from literature to statistical tools. This knowledge may also be an important connection point for any future knowledge.”
– Student from the Class of 2020, Environmental Studies

Many students stated that thinkers and ideas discussed in Common Curriculum courses were referenced frequently in classes taken later, suggesting that the Common Curriculum informs and is integral to the other aspects of the Yale-NUS curriculum.
“Some of the ideas I came across also got referenced again sometime later in life, or also came up in some of my own thoughts/musings, so I credit the Common Curriculum for a lot of direct and indirect intellectual nourishment.”
– Student from the Class of 2017, Environmental Studies

“I think I benefitted most from the PPT, LH, and MST courses, although I only became aware of these benefits in my third year, when the foundational concepts I had learnt helped illuminate the readings I was encountering. I found myself wanting to return to key texts we had examined in MST i.e. Marx’s theories on use and exchange value, Weber’s conception of the iron cage, Mozi’s and Xunzi’s theorisations of human nature, Lu Xun’s writings on Chinese nationalism, because so many of these kept popping up in secondary readings I was doing for my other classes. It was lovely to be able to understand what the authors were referring to, and thinking about whether their applications of the theories I had read made sense. This in turn allowed me to think about how I could apply these theories to my own work, and helped me begin to bridge the conceptual gap between theory and praxis.”
– Student from the Class of 2017, History

Going beyond cultural hegemonies

One of the goals of the Common Curriculum was to go beyond East and West, rising to the challenge of exposing students to a variety of traditions while addressing the danger of treating cultures or civilisations as fixed and coherent wholes and thereby contributing to caricatures already too common in the popular imagination. A student stated that such an approach to various intellectual traditions have provided an opportunity to learn about different cultures and challenge preconceptions of them.

“I also enjoyed how there has been a focus on challenging cultural binaries; in particular, for subjects like Literature and the Humanities and Philosophy and Political Thought, our reading of both Western and non-Western writings has challenged my past conceptions about non-Western civilisations, while training me to have a deeper respect for different cultures around the world.”
– Student from the Class of 2020, major undeclared

Challenges

Balancing depth and breadth

Some students felt that the attempt to “cover” a large amount of material through the Common Curriculum resulted in an emphasis on breadth that compromised the depth of study. These comments demonstrated that students felt a lack of time to engage with the course material thoroughly, or perceived that their instructors rushed through material to complete the syllabus.

“However, I do find that a pitfall of the Common Curriculum is in how courses within seem quite thinly spread, often at the expense of depth; for example, a course in PPT can rush through the works of various thinkers, but without dwelling much into each thinkers’ works.”
– Student from the Class of 2020, major undeclared

“I think the three courses tried to do too much in too short a period (this is cohort-specific) and I thought a narrower scope might have made the course more enriching.”
– Student from the Class of 2017, History

“Pitfalls: a curriculum that does too much in too little a time.”
– Student from the class of 2019, Physical Science
Other comments, on the other hand, asked for more breadth, pointing out gaps in what the curriculum offers. This suggests that students did not grasp that the Common Curriculum was designed to offer representation rather than coverage, and makes no claims to comprehensively cover any field. Nonetheless, these comments the importance on refining the ways in which the goals of the curriculum are communicated to students.

“A potential pitfall is that the curriculum attempts to cover all potential knowledge areas and in that attempt it inevitably fails. This leaves glaring holes in the curriculum such as Russian or South American literature. Also it needs to cover more environmental areas considering the impact and significance of climate change in the future.”
– Student from the Class of 2020, Environmental Studies

Perhaps a course for computing and coding would be extremely useful in this digital age where computing language has become as essential as languages of communication.”
– Student from the Class of 2019, Environmental Studies

Challenges in teaching across disciplines

Some students highlighted the inconsistency in how professors approached courses, which sometimes undermined the creation of a common experience across sections. Some students also attributed different teaching methods to the fact that faculty were often teaching content outside of their areas of specialisation. These comments demonstrate the continued challenge of balancing faculty autonomy and the creation of a common experience for both faculty and students. However, they also show that students have a healthy recognition of the importance of faculty pushing themselves to teach content outside of their specialisations.

“If instructors themselves are uncomfortable about teaching beyond their area of specialty, can their students really be expected to transcend their self-imposed boundaries?”
– Student from the Class of 2020, Major undeclared

Addressing different educational backgrounds

One of the challenges of the Common Curriculum is creating a common experience that accommodates the diverse educational backgrounds and preparations of students. Many students pointed out that they were over-prepared for some courses and therefore did not gain much from the course.

“I was forced to take classes covering content I already learned in high school.”
– Student from the Class of 2020, major undeclared

“[The Common Curriculum] fails to adequately balance the expectations of having students come in with drastically different backgrounds and interests.”
– Student from the Class of 2019, Physical Sciences

On the other hand, certain courses presented challenges to students who had no prior experience in the subject.

“I felt like I had learnt a lot from some of the courses I took (like the historical immersion course I’m taking now), but I find myself being compared and graded according to the standards of the class, which are much higher than mine given that most of my classmates have more of a knowledge of history than I do. This can be discouraging when trying to pick up a new skill”
– Student from the Class of 2017, Psychology
Integrating the quantitative reasoning and the sciences into Common Curriculum presented particular challenges in this area. This challenge was very much anticipated by the faculty, and is demonstrated by the way students had differing ideas of what an engaging and foundational science course should look like. Many students highlighted that the courses were too easy, while some felt that it did not cover the skills they were hoping to. Many also highlighted that the curriculum was skewed towards the humanities and social sciences, suggesting that insufficient learning takes place through the quantitative reasoning and science classes. Often, this occurred because of their prior exposure to these disciplines.

“The curriculum is overly skewed towards humanities/social sciences, etc.” – Student from the Class of 2019, Physical Sciences

“The science and math modules, however, seem way too easy for me personally, and I did not learn much from that the time spent on these modules.” – Student from the Class of 2020, Mathematical, Computational and Statistical Sciences

“Little is gained from SI for those that have taken AP Bio… QR is redundant for those that have taken AP Statistics.” – Student from the Class of 2020, major undeclared

Some students also suggested compromising on the common experience, stating that they would have preferred more flexibility in choosing courses that align with their own learning goals or interests.

“While I understand that not everyone found these courses redundant, I think an opt out option would be helpful for those that have taken an equivalent course in high school.”
– Student from the Class of 2020, major undeclared

“There was less flexibility than I liked regarding the classes I could take to fulfil a particular common curriculum theme (like with the quantitative sciences; I just had to take QR when I might have preferred to learn statistics with Python instead, or learn pure math). I would rather have distribution requirements to fulfil at some point over the 4 years rather than be forced into specific classes for pretty much the whole year.”
– Student from the Class of 2017, Environmental Studies

Concluding Remarks

It is the aspiration of the college that students will continue to value this curriculum while also thinking critically about what it means for their education. These reflections are a demonstration of their investment in building the Common Curriculum alongside faculty, and also serve to inform faculty about the effectiveness of the curriculum and the teaching methods that have been utilized so far. Ultimately, students are co-creators of the Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS and student voices will always remain an important part of refining the curriculum as the college moves forward.

During 2012 and 2013 the Inaugural Curriculum Committee of Yale-NUS College met at Yale University in New Haven to create the “Curriculum Report” for Yale-NUS College. The report, entitled “Yale-NUS College: A New Community of Learning,” was authored by the Committee members Bryan Garsten, Rajeev Patke, Charles Bailyn, Jane Jacobs, Hway Chuan Kang, and Bryan Penprase, in consultation with the inaugural faculty members of Yale-NUS College, who were based in New Haven during Fall of 2012. The Curriculum Report provides several chapters that frame the origins of Yale-NUS College. It begins with the Historical Context for Yale-NUS College, the roots of liberal arts within the United States, and the expansion of interest in liberal arts in Asia.

Subsequent chapters discuss the basis of Yale-NUS education within the notion of “articulate communication” and describes how the campus and intellectual community of Yale-NUS is designed to facilitate such distinctive and open-ended conversation. The report describes how Yale-NUS College would structure its majors, the rationale for a department-free organisation of the college, and the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. A final chapter discusses the larger implications that Yale-NUS College might have in the transformation of students into cosmopolitan and broadly educated citizens, and the impact that this would have for tolerance and civility in society. This bold vision for Yale-NUS College provided a blueprint for the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum and the Yale-NUS College - that came to life during 2013 when Yale-NUS opened to its first class of students, with the inauguration of the Yale-NUS College campus in October 2015.


A Common Curriculum worth talking about

Offering more than breadth

The most common way of speaking about collegiate education divides student course work into two parts, one offering “breadth” and another providing “depth.” Educators are often much clearer about the meaning of “depth” than they are about the meaning of “breadth,” however. By depth, they generally mean the academic disciplines or interdisciplinary fields as they are taught and explored through the majors. Traditionally, colleges allow each discipline or program broad leeway in setting the requirements for its major, deferring to the internal standards appropriate to the field. Faculty from different majors rarely confer with one another about these requirements, except to try to infer what changes must be made to increase the number of students, who select their own majors. When interdisciplinary majors are established, the faculty members involved are usually granted autonomy about the content of the major. In fact, it is rare for the requirements of a major, whether disciplinary or interdisciplinary, to occasion much controversy outside the relevant departments and programmes. By the time a major is established, there is a known community of judgment—the faculty in the department or program—that is assumed to have competence to set appropriate standards for achievement.

The situation is quite different when considering the “breadth” requirements, because there is no clear and shared understanding of what breadth means. Often, the term seems to mean little more than a smorgasbord of courses lying somewhere outside the student’s major. Yale-NUS College aims to provide a more coherent form of general education.

We therefore depart from the manner in which both of our parent institutions conceive of their breadth requirements. Like many American institutions today, Yale asks students to fulfill certain “distribution requirements.” Students are required to elect one or more courses in each of several categories. These categories are either “areas” (the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences) or “skills” (writing, foreign languages, and quantitative reasoning). There are guidelines on what a course must contain to satisfy a particular requirement, but at Yale and
many other institutions, many or most courses offered to undergraduates qualify to satisfy one or another of the distribution requirements.\(^\text{49}\)

NUS inherited from Singapore's colonial past a system that did not emphasiscategorisede breadth requirements. A move away from that system began in the faculty of Business Administration, with the introduction of a semester-based modular system in 1993. In more recent times, the university has established a standard that each student should elect five courses outside the department or faculty in which he or she is enrolled, and departments and faculties have created additional course modules to serve such students. Currently the university requires courses in General Education, Singapore Studies, and breadth requirements, which are in turn categorised in different ways. In creating this three-orzpart requirement with further subdivisions, NUS has moved toward an approach to general education similar in form to a distribution requirement.\(^\text{50}\)

One concern about a system of distribution requirements is that it creates a significant risk of incoherence in student course programmes outside the major. At Yale there are literally thousands of courses to choose from, most of which could, in principle, be used to satisfy the distribution requirements. It can be difficult for students to structure a reasonable path through this maze of possibilities. If many students find their way reasonably well, that is in large part because they are helped by the power of campus traditions and customs, passed on from academic advisers and older students to younger ones. In addition, the culture in which many of the students were raised is one in which the outlines of a liberal arts education are well known. Students have an intuitive sense of what a well-rounded course program would look like. Virtually no guidance is given by the general education requirements themselves or by the course catalog, which offers more choice than counsel. Students coming into American colleges from abroad often report feeling lost in terms of course selection at the beginning.

Of course, one might respond that a good system of faculty advising is sufficient to deal with this problem and that the remaining potential for incoherence is a price worth paying in return for students’ ability to exercise choice over their programmes of study and thereby take ownership of their learning. There are, however, at least two additional problems that we see in systems of distribution requirements.

The first is that the range of courses typically available in each distribution category is so wide that it allows students to remain squarely within their comfort zones. We believe education is sometimes most elective when it is uncomfortable. In distribution systems, students tend to regard their breadth requirements as ones to be fulfilled in the easiest, most congenial way possible. They avoid precisely those challenges and opportunities for development that seem most difficult. Self-segregation is a result.

We see women’s studies courses that include few male students, economics courses comprised only of students interested in business and finance, and introductory science courses full only of pre-medical students. We also see courses taken predominantly by athletes on a particular team, or by creative arts students, or by the members of specific social organisations. In the sciences, where humanities students often feel ill-equipped and uncomfortable, a few courses often develop a reputation as the easy way to fulfill the requirement, while other equally worthy courses acquire a different reputation, and are shunned by the students who would benefit most from them. Sometimes, courses with many students from outside the discipline are regarded as less serious, and so faculty may have incentives to “weed out” such students from their classes. In general, we feel that a distribution system makes it too easy for students to let themselves settle for what they are most comfortable with and to wall themselves off from some of the provocations that should come from a diverse set of peers and teachers.

We are impressed by the observation made by professors who teach in core programmes about the potential for such programmes to draw students into one intellectual community. As Andrew Delbanco writes when describing a benefit of Columbia University’s Core, “once they have gone through the Core, no student is a complete stranger to any other.”\(^\text{51}\) The assignment of students into small discussion

\(^{50}\) For a description of the undergraduate curriculum structure at NUS, see http://www.nus.edu.sg/registrar/edu/UG/curriculum.html.

\(^{49}\) For a description of the Yale College undergraduate curriculum, see http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/undergraduate-curriculum.

\(^{51}\) Delbanco, College, 30.

\(^{52}\) Nussbaum, Not for Profit, 45.
sections will not track the social, class, or ethnic lines along which they might otherwise be tempted to segregate themselves. The tendency for students to group themselves on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, or first language affiliation, rightly identified by Martha Nussbaum as a habit that liberal education aims to disrupt, will be challenged by the practice of intense discussion in small groups across such dividing lines. A Common Curriculum promotes habits of thought and discussion that are valuable for living with others in a diverse modern society.

Second, in a system of distribution requirements, students fulfill the breadth requirement largely by taking courses drawn from the ordinary offerings of the various departments and programmes. Such courses are usually designed, with the demands of a particular discipline in mind, as introductions. A true general education course, however, is not always best thought of as an introduction to a discipline. It may in fact be the last course a student will take in the area, in which case it should have educational goals different from those of an introduction for students in the major. What should the goals of general education courses be? We think that a collegiate community of learning is created in no small part through the faculty’s deliberations about precisely this question.

A faculty that deliberates together about what to teach

The decision by the founders of Yale-NUS that all students at the College would devote a significant portion of their course work to one Common Curriculum, taught by teams of faculty, has major implications for faculty life as well as for students. It means that faculty must create a whole set of courses together, teach them together, and find ways of reviewing and revising them together.

Colleges that choose to encourage breadth of student course work through distribution requirements instead of a common (or core) curriculum do not require their faculty to collectively engage in this work. They presume, perhaps, that faculty will never be brought to agreement on the answers to such questions and that they cannot sufficiently relinquish the perspectives of their own research disciplines to ask about the whole of a student’s education. Thus, courses arise almost entirely from individual faculty members’ interests and senses of what is important for students to learn. Many faculty members in these settings offer broad courses designed to contribute to the general education of students and they take their responsibility to their institutions seriously; they do not treat courses merely as chances to elaborate their eccentric research agendas. Nevertheless, they do not have to deliberate together with their colleagues in a direct, concrete manner about precisely what students should learn. The breadth requirement therefore represents the sum of particular decisions by individual faculty members; it is not a statement by the faculty as a whole. This opens the door to faculty considering themselves primarily as free agents or entrepreneurs, rather than as members of a collegiate community of learning, an attitude that may have contributed to the gradual decay of effective faculty governance that observers of American collegiate education have noticed and often lamented.

Some schools have noted this problem but have tried to address it without adopting a core curriculum that all students must take. Harvard, for example, has a middling approach in which faculty members individually propose and construct courses outside the departments and programmes, courses that are specifically designed for general education purposes. The general education courses are approved if they have certain features and are grouped under headings roughly comparable to the distribution areas required at other institutions. Students then choose any course they like under each heading. This system, while different from a distribution scheme in important ways, still allows general education to be crafted mainly by the choices of individual faculty members and students. Faculty members design the courses on their own and do not deliberate together about their contents. When Harvard recently tried to reform its program and appointed a committee to consider the substance of general education, the head of the committee confessed to the student newspaper how difficult the task was and how rarely the faculty ordinarily discuss such matters:

“Creating and instituting a new general education program tends to create . . . anxiety,” said English professor Louis Menand, who co-chaired the Gen Ed task force that wrote the curricular legislation. “One reason is that the general education program represents the Faculty's collective judgment about what every students [sic] ought to know, and since professors are all trained in different disciplines, this can be a difficult conversation to have.”

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“We are just not accustomed to thinking about education in general terms,” he continued. “It’s not our specialty.”

Faculty at Yale-NUS, we hope, will come to regard thinking about collegiate education in general terms as one of their specialties, and students will come to the College in part because faculty are interested in working together on just this project. During the year prior to the College’s opening, the inaugural faculty has been intensely engaged in a deliberative process about its general education curriculum. In many institutions with traditional core curricula, the content of the common courses remains more or less fixed from year to year, the product of tradition rather than deliberations of the existing faculty. When founding a new college, however, the notion of a tradition has yet to be established, and the different models we might consult point in different directions. Columbia University’s Core Curriculum adopted one approach, Harvard University’s Program in General Education another; Seoul National University’s College of Liberal Studies tried one system, Waseda University another, and so on. The Yale-NUS faculty consulted these precedents but was not bound by them. They have had to bring their best individual judgments into conversation with the different views of their colleagues, working in interdisciplinary groups toward syllabi that reflect their collective sense of what would be best.

One striking feature of these conversations at Yale-NUS has been the importance of junior faculty members in the discussions. Although junior faculty at most universities design their own elective courses, they are not usually given much voice in the design of general education courses. Our working groups on Common Curriculum courses sought to draw upon both the wisdom of more experienced colleagues and the new ideas of younger professors. This has required an impressive willingness on the part of the more established faculty to entertain new ideas and has encouraged a welcome boldness in the younger faculty; it has also helped to kindle deep intellectual friendships between ranks.

Unlike academic conferences on education and pedagogy that can end in unresolved debates, the process of developing a curriculum for a particular institution with plans to open on a particular date does not allow faculty to remain dogmatic in their views and content to be on one side of a debate. It asks them to deliberate together and endorse one concrete outcome, a syllabus, acceptable to all. The process of arguing about the syllabi has forced faculty to work across disciplinary and methodological boundaries that ordinary university life rarely calls into question. Biologists and physicists have had to come to some shared sense of what scientific inquiry is, and they have been pressed by historians of science and philosophers to put their understandings in theoretical and historical context. Economists and anthropologists have confronted the fractured landscape of the social sciences in efforts to devise courses on comparative social institutions and modern social thought. Quantitative reasoning became a surprisingly difficult battleground among scientists, social scientists, mathematicians, and computer scientists, while literary scholars and epistemologists have had their own version of the debate that Plato, in ancient Greece, referred to as the “old quarrel between philosophy and poetry.” These conversations were not easy; often they were intense, as different methodological assumptions and conventions came into conflict. We have not shied away from such encounters; in fact, we have insisted upon them, with the hope that they would produce fresh insights and would help turn scholars into colleagues. We think that these arguments have done just that, and will continue to do so.

For a Common Curriculum to carry on encouraging true faculty deliberation, it will have to be subject to periodic review and renewal. The Yale-NUS faculty has committed itself in advance to reviewing the College’s Common Curriculum frequently, weighing the benefits of continuity and tradition in its deliberations but also the benefit of having the curriculum truly be a reflection of the faculty’s collective understanding. In a sense, the conversation about the curriculum will be ongoing, because our Common Curriculum courses will be taught by teams of faculty. Following a format that works well in Yale’s Directed Studies program, a small group of professors will take turns lecturing in each course, each speaking on an area of expertise or special interest to the whole class of students enrolled in the course and to the other faculty teaching the course. Each professor on the team will also meet with a group of eighteen of these students twice each week. No member of the faculty will be

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an expert on every week’s material in a Common Curriculum course, and so all will at some point or another lead seminar discussions with their groups of students on material outside their particular expertise. The faculty will therefore serve as a model for how to engage intelligently with material outside their specialties. They will also meet as a team each week to discuss the material and methods of teaching it. We try, in this way, to respond to the call for “faculty’s corporate responsibility for the curriculum” that emerges often in discussions of collegiate education.\textsuperscript{56}

To view the Common Curriculum as a concrete centerpiece of deliberation for the faculty as a whole is to demonstrate that core courses need not be dismissed as musty remnants from previous centuries or outmoded surveys of irrelevant canons. On the contrary, a living, breathing Common Curriculum is a demonstration of a college’s institutional commitment to fostering a functional community of scholars able to speak across disciplinary boundaries well enough to engage in meaningful common deliberation and willing to submit themselves and their disciplinary perspectives to the common needs of the college and its students.

**Challenges we faced in designing our core courses**

In deliberating about the content of our Common Curriculum courses, we have found that several broad issues seem to arise in almost every course, in spite of the deep differences between their topics and modes of inquiry. First, we found ourselves quickly confronting the impossibility of comprehensively covering any field. We chose, in every case, to give students a smaller number of experiences in serious, deep inquiry instead. One way to think of this is that we chose representation over coverage—we aim to give students high-quality learning experiences. The Literature and Humanities courses in the first year, for instance, make no claim to cover all the greatest texts of world literature. How could they? Much more important, we have thought, is to provide exemplary experiences of what it is to read a complicated and deep text closely, to proceed from a superficial to a more nuanced understanding of a work of art, in a variety of genres and from a variety of cultural perspectives. In the Scientific Inquiry course we have similarly chosen to offer significant experiences in observational science, in laboratory science, in theoretical or computational modeling, and in mathematics as such, but the specific content of the unit will vary from year to year and will make no effort to cover all relevant material. And in the social sciences we have crafted a new kind of core course organised around problems rather than disciplines, allowing us to avoid the temptation to try to cover traditional fields.

Thinking in terms of representation rather than coverage allowed us to compile for each Common Curriculum course a storehouse of possible units much larger than what could be taught in a single semester. The final choice of what would be taught in the course each year then depends not only on a judgment about the intrinsic importance of each unit—there are many more units worth teaching than we can teach—but also on considerations of pedagogical coherence and the interests of the faculty teaching that year. This approach should reduce the sense that the courses are insisting on a particular canon and allow a degree of continuous evolution in their syllabi. Every year, a somewhat different set of faculty teaching the course will review the successes and difficulties encountered in previous years, add new items to the storehouse of possible units, and reexamine the question of what in particular will be taught that year. Of course some units will be taught again and again—otherwise the Common Curriculum would not be “common” among different years of students and faculty. But the courses will also evolve as new scholarship and topics of interest emerge, and as new faculty join the team. This will serve to keep the course fresh and allow change to happen in an incremental fashion, rather than requiring a comprehensive full-up review of the course with the attendant fierce battles over what is and is not included.

A second issue that arose in the discussions of our various Common Curriculum course working groups was the question of how to juxtapose different disciplines and cultural contexts in such a way that comparisons between them are made manifest, while at the same time ensuring that the internal integrity of each discipline or culture was maintained. Thus in the humanities we want to bring different cultures into conversation, but also to understand each on its own terms; in the social and natural sciences we want to display how disciplines can approach the same problem from different perspectives without losing the power that comes from focusing on

\textsuperscript{56} Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees (Association of American Colleges), Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community: The Findings and Recommendations of the Project on Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees (1985), 38, cited in Kimball, Orators and Philosophers, 240.
one perspective at a time.\textsuperscript{57}

Three distinct approaches to this quandary emerged from our deliberations. First, one could simply divide each Common Curriculum course into monolithic units on several different topics, each largely independent of the others, though perhaps with a bit of discussion of how they interact at the edges. This monolithic approach clearly maintains the integrity of each area, but does not necessarily encourage thought and discussion of how the areas might interact. Second, there is a dialogic approach, in which a number of primary topics are studied in some depth, but each one is followed by one or more responses from other disciplines or cultures as counterpoints. This has the advantage of modeling substantive dialogue across cultural or disciplinary boundaries, but the potential defect of confusing students with critical perspectives before they have developed their own understandings of the primary topics. Third, a thematic approach offers a set of broad themes, such as “justice” in philosophy or “energy” in science, picking out approaches to that theme from a variety of cultures or disciplines. This promotes thematic coherence but risks denying students the experience of immersing themselves in particular cultures or disciplines and learning their coherence from the inside; it also risks imposing the professor’s thematic priorities and terminology on material rather than allowing the material to speak on its own terms. We found it helpful to identify these alternatives, each with its own benefits and liabilities, and have incorporated parts of each in our various Common Curriculum courses.

A third challenge that all Common Curriculum courses face to some extent is the relation between their content and the preparation required for particular majors. We decided early on that the Common Curriculum courses at Yale-NUS should not be governed by the needs of particular majors. It is true that a large fraction of our students’ first two years of study is to be spent on the Common Curriculum, and therefore that these courses necessarily will serve as background to the various majors. But we did not construct them as exploratory tours of possible majors or as methodological introductions to the disciplines. Instead, to ensure that students would be ready for sophisticated work in the majors by their third year, we created a supplementary group of courses that offer a bridge from the Common Curriculum to the majors. This was particularly important for majors that are cumulative in nature, as in the sciences and economics. These bridge courses can be designed, and if necessary redesigned, to incorporate whatever basic material is deemed necessary as prerequisite to the major, but happened not to find its way into a particular Common Curriculum course. In this way we can protect the Common Curriculum courses from being colonised by the needs of particular majors and prevent them from being reduced to compromises among different disciplines about what students need to know to enter their fields.

Finally, we grappled with the problem of instructor autonomy. Although team teaching and interdisciplinary deliberation are key components of this Common Curriculum, we have found that we are most successful when we also protect space for significant autonomy in the way that individual instructors approach the common material, and even in which supplementary material they bring into each course. As noted above, our structure generally involves a team of faculty teaching each course, with common lectures each week but each professor running his or her own discussion seminar twice a week on the material. Those seminars, and the writing and speaking assignments associated with them, should allow faculty to adopt an approach to the material that they feel comfortable with. This means that syllabi should be composed not with a particular ideological and methodological approach in mind, but instead with the goal of including rich material that can be approached from many vantage points. This was, in our view, an argument for basing humanities courses on texts that have been read in many ways by many different sorts of readers over a long period of time.

Guiding considerations for a new generation of core courses

The desire to study something in common does not offer an answer to the question of what should be studied. Nor, we think, does the oft-repeated injunction to teach “critical thinking” provide enough guidance. Sometimes language about giving students “early exposure” to multiple disciplines crept into our discussions, as it does in the University of Tokyo’s explanation of its liberal arts curriculum, but we feel that relying on that way of understanding general education risks subordinating

it to the disciplines, since it may be viewed merely as a trial run at various majors.  

In deliberating about what to include and navigating the challenges described above, we allowed ourselves to be guided by five broad considerations, each of which is relevant to more than one part of the Common Curriculum:

**Fundamental questions of human experience**

First and foremost, we have not shied away from identifying certain questions and problems as fundamental to any serious thinking about human experience. Of course different traditions may emphasise different perspectives, but certain questions arise in some form to any reflective human being: What causes natural phenomena to occur? To what extent can I trust my senses? What is the best response to human emotions such as fear and anger? How should children be protected and raised? How can words, images, or melodies capture especially striking moments of human experience? What form of living together is best, or best for us? To what extent can natural processes be controlled, and how, and to what purposes? Are there forms of intelligence other than human in the universe? What, if anything, gives a human life importance and meaning? A Common Curriculum that offered shared reference points and sparked conversations but that neglected questions such as the ones listed above is not satisfactory, in our view. Our responsibility is to offer not merely breadth or diversity of knowledge and approaches to knowledge; we do not put much value on broad but shallow learning. We aim, instead, to give depth to the breadth we offer. A Common Curriculum should give young adults language with which to articulate and navigate the deepest dilemmas of human existence.

**Great works as incitement to self-examination**

Even a quick glance at our syllabi in the humanities will reveal that while we did reevaluate the many possible approaches to a Common Curriculum in literature and philosophy, we have not left the “great works” approach behind. It is easy to dismiss the traditional great books as crusty with tradition—until you sit down and read them. The fact of the matter is that many students and faculty continue to experience the close reading of certain canonical texts as revelatory. A course of great works “slakes the human craving for contact with works of art that somehow register one’s own longings and yet exceed what one has been able to articulate by and for oneself.” Which books, however, are most likely to articulate “one’s own longings”? Many of the works we read in our courses have proven their ability to resonate with readers from an astonishing variety of times and places, and we expect them to do so in Singapore as well. To some extent, however, the resonance of a work may also depend on the culture that a particular student body is most likely to feel at home in. One powerful argument for Western students beginning with great texts of the Western tradition is that those students have, whether they realize it or not, been shaped by the culture emerging out of these works, so that in reading them they are engaged in a work of self-exploration; the same logic applies to students from cultures shaped by Confucianism reading Confucius and debates about its interpretation, for example. There is a danger of reifying a particular understanding of a culture or tradition, but there is also a danger of denying our own historicity, of ignoring the fact that we live among institutions, cultures, and norms that have emerged in a particular way. Studying a “heritage,” in the old-fashioned language of the Harvard Red Book, need not be mainly about transmitting or implanting a particular set of values; it can instead be about better understanding our our culturally specific intuitions and so better understanding ourselves. Today, one feature of ourselves that can hardly be ignored is our modernity. To study the question of what modernity is—to ask about its promises and its pitfalls, and about the different manifestations of it and responses to it in different places—is to ask questions with profound personal meaning for people from a whole variety of backgrounds.

Of course the number of works that has shaped even one culture, much less all of modernity, far exceeds the number that can be studied well in any course, so no syllabus is fully determined by this criterion. Still, we think that education should begin close to home, even if it aims to end far away. In both the United States and Singapore, migration patterns and newly recognised forms of diversity make the question of what counts as “home” complicated enough. In the globalised context of Yale-NUS College, the question of what “home” is becomes much more difficult,

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58 Ito, “Liberal Arts Education.”
59 Kronman, Education’s End, 41.
60 Delbanco, College, 32. See also Nannerl O. Keohane, “The Liberal Arts and Presidential Leadership” Harvard University, Report of the Committee on the Objectives of a General Education, 41–51.
and the challenge faced by the humanistic and comparative parts of the Common Curriculum is therefore all the more intense.

**Beyond East and West: cultural kaleidoscopes and dialogues**

The question of how to understand and compare cultural traditions is a live one in many disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, and it is an issue that has dominated our deliberations about some of our Common Curriculum courses. In designing our courses, we have been especially cognizant of the danger of treating cultures or civilisations as fixed and coherent wholes and thereby contributing to caricatures already too common in the popular imagination. We cannot teach the whole of “Chinese thought” (much less “Asian thought,” whatever that might be), any more than we can adequately capture “European thought”; we certainly would not want to pit these traditions against one another in an intellectual clash of civilisations. Nevertheless, it would also be a mistake to give up on the commonsense aspiration to create a continual dialogue across civilisations. In the end, we hope our students will move beyond thoughts of a simple East-West axis to appreciate the whole “kaleidoscope” of intersecting influences and readings that make up any real experience of reading broadly and reflectively.62

A humanities module in literature from a typical liberal arts college in the United States might tackle a genre such as epic with primary reference to authors such as Homer, Virgil, and Milton. At Yale-NUS College, a course that tackles epic will read The Odyssey and the Ramayana and Gilgamesh in a context not confined to the canon of any one civilisation, looking out also for ways in which readers in one culture have read works in another. At the same time, it will not ignore the variation in what it is to be an epic in different times and places—the different production and reception histories, and the different contexts. Likewise, if a unit in a Literature and Humanities course is devoted to a comparative reading of cultural productions united around a theme or a period in human history, students will encounter a wide range of artifacts: for example, the verse form of the ghazal, which links the cultures of several languages from Arabia to India, will be studied for its contrast with the tone and style of the Petrarchan sonnet from Europe and its links to the formal intricacies of poetry and calligraphy from Middle Eastern cultures with other forms of pattern making, from carpets and tapestries to architectural embellishments. Likewise, the modernity spoken of by Charles Baudelaire in “The Painter of Modern Life” as a mix of the transitory, the exciting, and the disconcerting will be linked to the rise of industrial urbanism, the growth of Empire, the motif of the nightmare in modern art (as in Edvard Munch’s Scream), and the connections between all these and the allure of the exotic, as in the Japonisme of J. M. Whistler or the primitivisms of Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso, whose works can be compared with the finest products of the ukiyo-e tradition of Japanese woodblock prints, or the traditions of wood and bone carving from the South Sea islands and Central Africa.

A course in philosophy might look at the development of ethical thought in a context that compares the Stoics from ancient Greece with the discourse of Krishna from the Bhagavad Gita, the Madhyamaka Buddhism of Santideva, and the neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi from China. And when a unit in the social sciences asks about the structure and function of family, it is able to draw on conventions of comparative thinking to ensure that this question is answered with reference to a number of cultural and historical contexts.

In bringing disparate works and traditions into dialogue with one another, there is a real danger of unwittingly giving one frame of reference priority over others by accepting its categories and then looking for comparable examples in other cultures or times. Some observers have responded to this worry by shying away from comparison altogether, but we believe that it is possible to be reflective about comparisons, and we aim for “comparison without hegemony.”63

We also recognise, however, the danger of a superficial cosmopolitanism that leaves students with little appreciation for the internal logic and complexity of particular trains of thought and influence. The world’s literatures, religions, and philosophies are not merely menus from which we can select our favorite lines to concoct a comforting feast. Confucius, Buddha, and Socrates may all have been

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part of an “axial age,” but the traditions of interpretation surrounding each were quite distinct, and bringing them into too easy a relation with one another would not do justice to the genuine difference and strangeness that a person raised primarily under the influence of one should feel when confronting another. We have found that historians play a key role in facilitating our appreciation of these complexities. Our historians have been spread out among several different working groups on Common Curriculum courses in literature and in philosophy and political thought, and they have helped us to contextualise the various works we are reading. It would be best if we could also demonstrate the importance of linguistic differences, a challenge that our Common Curriculum courses, all in translation, have not yet adequately addressed. One task that remains for future iterations of our curriculum is to address more satisfactorily the place of language training in our curriculum.

Still, we believe that sensitive attention to the issue of translation in the classroom can at least raise key questions for the students and point to the importance of the fact that each work comes from a particular place.

The best response to a concern about reifying traditions and civilisations, we believe, is deep engagement with particular works, thinkers, and histories, as well as forms of social analysis that are sensitive to the importance of context. A work of literature or theory does not speak for whole peoples or places or eras; each work speaks on its own. Any point in space and time is the center of its own world, and a writer, scientist, or artist looks out from that spot with a unique perspective on his or her own canon of classics, with a distinctive understanding of history, and within a particular horizon of meaning. An education that aims to succeed in linking students from all over the globe, such as that offered by Yale-NUS College, must not try merely to “expose” them to a variety of viewpoints. More deeply, it should aim to give them the experience of coming to know a small number of particular perspectives well, with a hint of the inner complexity and dynamics of each. Then it should provide space for students to begin to bring these different perspectives into contact with one another, at times showing them examples of previous dialogues across linguistic and cultural boundaries, at times simply making them aware of their own status as readers who can create such a dialogue themselves. Giving students a taste for the difficult and worthwhile task of genuine interpretive engagement is a demanding but plausible goal, and one that will help to bring a diverse international body of students and faculty together into one community of learning. Only after developing relatively deep understandings are students ready for the difficult and important work of discerning among them.

**Integrating the sciences and quantitative reasoning into a Common Curriculum**

Most core curricula in the United States focus primarily on the humanities. In a few cases, most notably St. John’s College, a great books approach extends to the social sciences and sciences as well. Normally, however, students who are interested in learning something about social sciences such as economics and psychology turn to the introductory courses in the field, which serve both majors and large numbers of other students. In the natural sciences, introductory courses to the various fields sometimes act as pre-medical courses, but do not usually serve general education purposes. Instead, a different set of courses is set up to expose “non-scientists” to science and thus satisfy distribution requirements. For reasons already explained, we do not believe that these patterns of enrollment create the best learning experience for all students. We think that a common experience in the social and natural sciences is possible and will be beneficial to students and faculty for the same general reasons that it is in the humanities.

Education in science and mathematics is too often imagined in purely utilitarian terms. The benefits of new technology are so impressive, so ubiquitous, and so promising that it is sometimes hard to remember that science is not merely a tool to generate new technology, but a powerful and fascinating intellectual endeavor in its own right. All human beings, from their earliest days, think scientifically in a broad sense. We wonder how the world works; we infer models from observed patterns and make predictions based on those models; we love solving puzzles. Improving our competence at these natural modes of thought and learning more sophisticated methods of testing our intuitions against empirical evidence offer enormous intellectual satisfaction. This natural human joy in understanding the natural and social world is augmented by the immense impact that scientific knowledge can

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have on our ability to solve practical problems in the world, from issues related to health and the environment to problems of social and political organisation.

The character of modern science and the sociology of scientific practice have nevertheless produced a tension between science and the humanities, a tension described most famously in C.P. Snow's discussion of the "Two Cultures," in which he laments the division of intellectual life in mid-twentieth-century Britain into a culture of the arts and humanities and a culture of science and technology that speak at cross purposes to each other. The separation of cultures that Snow described can be seen clearly at both Yale and NUS. At Yale, science facilities are geographically separated from the central campus, sharing an area known as "Science Hill," which is perceived by undergraduates to be set apart from their ordinary lives as students. As one student put it in response to a survey of undergraduate attitudes toward the science curriculum, "I am not the kind of person who takes a course on Science Hill." At NUS, the situation is even more extreme, in that the Faculty of Science is institutionally separate from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; students must decide at the time of their application to the university whether or not they intend to study science seriously. In Singapore generally (and neighboring Malaysia) the division arises sooner, since the drive to modernity has fostered a school system in which students are "streamed" from early in their school careers into subjects such as Science or the Arts, depending on the abilities they show in school in tackling subjects like Mathematics, Physics, or Chemistry. One part of what the liberal education model will attempt in Singapore is to heal such rifts and divisions.

The sciences were not always so separate from the liberal arts. The roots of liberal education include, among other influences, the medieval quadrivium, a set of fields that included astronomy, arithmetic, and geometry alongside music. Well into the nineteenth century, science was known as "natural philosophy," a term that emphasises the connection between the sciences and the humanities. In the twentieth century, the philosopher and educator John Dewey argued for the inclusion of the sciences and other emerging forms of expertise in a liberal arts setting:

"The problem of securing to the liberal arts college its due function in democratic society is that of seeing to it that the technical subjects which are now socially necessary acquire a humane direction. There is nothing in them which is "inherently" exclusive; but they cannot be liberating if they are cut off from their humane sources and inspiration." 66

Incorporating the sciences into a Common Curriculum was for Dewey both a way of insuring that students feel equipped to understand an influential mode of thinking in modern society and of asking scientists to think about how their activities and findings fit into the contours of human life. This goal can only be achieved if scientists and non-scientists come together in substantive conversation, which requires each to have sufficient understanding of the other's way of thinking.

In practice, however, how can students with very different levels of previous experience in science usefully take a common course on science? We believe that a course that focuses on science as a mode of inquiry can successfully bring them together in a nontrivial manner. A great deal of secondary education in science is devoted to facts and techniques, so even students who have focused on science will have much to learn in studying how scientific theories arise, change, and sometimes are discarded. Students who do not intend to focus on science will emerge from such a course with a better sense of the power and limitations of the wide range of new scientific knowledge that will doubtless be uncovered in their lifetimes. The conversation that such a course will produce will help to humanize scientific understanding by focusing attention on the human activities through which new scientific facts are uncovered and established, rather than on memorisation of the facts themselves. Our course on scientific inquiry includes moments of significant contact with our course on philosophy and political thought, to bring the character of scientific inquiry into relief through comparison with earlier and different modes of inquiry.

However, a study of modes of inquiry alone did not seem to provide sufficient training in science for the modern era. We felt it important to explore with some specificity the "furniture" of modern science, the substantive knowledge and techniques that


are being developed. Thus we have created courses beyond the initial course on Scientific Inquiry that we hope will provide a comprehensive foundation in science for all our students. Here, however, we felt that the differences in preparation between those students who focused on science in their secondary education and those who did not might be insuperable. In addition, there seemed to be critical differences in content that would be appropriate between those students for whom this might be their last formal engagement with science and those who would most likely continue its study throughout their college careers. So we, somewhat reluctantly, split the final part of the science “common” curriculum into two tracks: Foundations of Science provides a two-semester introduction for second-year students who do not have extensive preparation in science, with an emphasis on applicable ideas associated with energy and the environment, while Integrated Science provides an interdisciplinary approach to science for those students with more extensive preparation. We note that we have not left the ideals of the Common Curriculum behind in designing these courses: Foundations of Science will be a rigorous introduction that builds the capabilities of students throughout a full year, so that they will not only emerge with information that they may not previously have known, but also with skills and confidence in scientific areas that have been developed and nurtured over time. Integrated Science is not conceived of as an introduction to the science majors, but as a self-contained integrated course—there may well be introductory material required for science majors that does not fit into this course, and it is for this reason that the “bridge” courses are being devised.

The spread of scientific and statistical forms of inquiry into the investigation of social phenomena, in the social sciences, has introduced an additional set of pedagogical challenges. Social and political issues attract a great deal of attention from students, so introductory courses in particular social science disciplines are often large. Students tend to receive the view of only one social science discipline at a time, however. One could imagine constructing a Common Curriculum course in the social sciences by simply assigning a few weeks to each social science discipline, from economics to anthropology, but we are seeking a more integrated approach, less respectful of disciplinary boundaries. We focus less on the methodologies and more on the problems they are intended to address and the social institutions and phenomena they are designed to study. Each unit in the syllabus calls forth approaches taken from a variety of disciplines that illuminate different issues. Combining a number of such topics will lead to an experience in the social sciences that prepares students to incorporate a wide range of approaches to particular problems, as they are likely to be called upon to do as citizens and leaders.

One shared characteristic of today’s natural and social sciences is their reliance on increasingly sophisticated forms of mathematical analysis. We have therefore included a course on quantitative reasoning very early in the Common Curriculum, regarding it as foundational for all students. The innovative course that our faculty has developed begins with the fundamental question of what should persuade us that an assertion is true. It then examines the role that quantitative, and especially statistical, argument can play in such persuasion. Mathematicians, scientists, and social scientists have all been involved in the creation of the course, so that students leave with a sense of how to think about different types of argumentation, from logical proof to various sorts of probabilistic thinking.

Since the study of social problems is especially interesting to many students, the course on quantitative reasoning will make a special effort to use examples for the social sciences. However, social phenomena also pose challenges for quantitative analysis. We have decided to take this as an opportunity to explore questions about data collection and biases in research design and statistical analysis, and in presentation of results. Understanding such biases is a particularly important skill in understanding the world and in determining how to evaluate the advice of experts. In the modern world especially, the ability to critically understand quantitative reasoning is a crucial part of the practical judgment that responsible citizenship requires. We acknowledge this fact by including a course on quantitative reasoning in the Common Curriculum, and we ask students to reflect on its historical and theoretical origin in the second-year Common Curriculum course on Modern Social Thought.

**General education that matures with the students**

The Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS College is not a set of merely requirements to swim through and leave behind on the way to the more serious study of the major. The Common Curriculum takes up the largest proportion of course work in the first two years, but it continues through all four years. We have already noted that the sequences of science courses allow for more advancement, even among non-scientists, than courses fulfilling a distributional requirement would, since later
Appendix B: "Introduction" and "Recomendations", from the Common Curriculum Self Study Report, 2015

In November 2015, the Common Curriculum Self Study Report was created by the internal Common Curriculum Self Study Committee (CCSSC). The committee members were Christopher Asplund, Charles Bailyn, Jane Jacobs, Rajeev Patke, Mira Seo, Jennifer Sheridan, Matthew Walker, Martin Weissman, and Jenifer Raver. The report was shared in faculty discussion sessions in August, 2015.

Excerpted below are two sections of the report, "Introduction" and "Recommendations". The full report may be found at: http://ccss-committee.commons.yale-nus.edu.sg/

Introduction

Prior to the opening of Yale-NUS College, Founding President Pericles Lewis promised its two parent institutions, National University of Singapore and Yale University, that the institution would undertake a review of its Common Curriculum in 2015, after the inaugural class of students had completed the majority of its Common Curriculum coursework. This review was to identify successful aspects of the Common Curriculum and to make recommendations for change based on issues or challenges uncovered. This was not the only instance of curricular review. Each course in the Common Curriculum is reviewed by its teaching team at the end of the semester, culminating in a facilitators’ report which is passed on to the subsequent teaching team. Other reviews of the Common Curriculum as a whole, and of other aspects of the curriculum and the College more generally, will certainly be conducted over the next few years. The current review involves a variety of stakeholders, including Yale-NUS students, faculty members and staff; National University of Singapore faculty; Yale University faculty; and the College’s Governing Board members. The review is taking place over eighteen months and in three phases: 1) an internal self-study, culminating in this report, 2) an external review & report to the Governing Board, leading to the adoption by the faculty of a set of recommendations for change; and 3) a period to implement recommended changes.
President Lewis and Dean of Faculty Charles Bailyn established a nine-person committee of faculty members and staff known as the Common Curriculum Self-Study Committee: Dean Charles Bailyn (Chair), Assistant Professor Christopher Asplund, Professor Jane Jacobs, Professor Rajeev Patke, Associate Professor Mira Seo, Assistant Professor Jennifer Sheridan, Assistant Professor Matthew Walker, Associate Professor Martin Weissman, and Director Jenifer Raver (Secretariat). The committee's two goals were 1) to evaluate the Common Curriculum based on various data and 2) to write a self-study report including recommendations that would be submitted to the External Review Panel for review. With these goals in mind, the college's senior leadership tasked the Dean of Faculty team with collecting various data such as course syllabi, course facilitators' reports and student course evaluations, as well as creating evaluation instruments such as online surveys and other feedback forms to gather data from the College's internal stakeholders – students, faculty members and staff. A wiki site for the Committee was also established to share and disseminate information among the Committee members as well as other groups and people participating in the review.

From February to May 2015, the Dean of Faculty team and other staff created, administered and analysed three online surveys as well as coded and analysed approximately 2,700 student course evaluations. The team also created a Student Advisory Group to the Dean of Faculty, vetting and choosing student applicants from the first and second year classes, including members of the Student Government Academic Subcommittee. Dean Bailyn asked the Student Advisory Group to elicit feedback from their peers through a variety of channels (i.e., student Facebook pages on academic matters), and provided this feedback to the Committee. The Dean and representatives of the Committee met several times with the Student Advisory Group to receive feedback.

During the same time period, the Committee met seven times to evaluate data and discuss various aspects of the Common Curriculum. The Committee identified eight challenges/issues requiring further investigation: 1) convergence and emergence in the Common Curriculum; 2) course alignment in assessment and grading; 3) Historical Immersion and Current Issues courses; 4) overall structure of the Common Curriculum; 5) quantitative and computational skills; 6) the sciences; 7) team teaching & teaching outside one's discipline, and; 8) writing across the Common Curriculum. The Committee then created eight working groups of faculty members and staff and charged them with investigating and reporting on one challenge/issue. A total of forty-five faculty and staff participated in these working groups. The working groups met several times to discuss their topics, and created summary reports based on their findings.

The Committee then reviewed the reports, and decided that the eight working group topics would be discussed during a three-day faculty workshop in late April 2015. Over ninety percent of faculty members participated in a discussion group during the workshop. Each discussion group presented its findings to the full faculty at the end of the workshop. In this way, the College's faculty members not only learned about the Common Curriculum review process but also were active and engaged participants in it.

In early May 2015, the Committee met for a four-day offsite workshop to more fully consider the eight working group topics, individually and in relation to one another. Each Committee member analysed and presented a working group topic, with potential alternatives to the Committee as a whole. The Committee members then discussed potential alternatives for changes to the Common Curriculum. During the final day, President Lewis and Executive Vice President (Academic Affairs) Tan Tai Yong joined the Committee to hear its presentation of alternatives and to provide feedback to the Committee. Before adjourning, the Committee decided on a structure, timeline and individual writing assignments for the self-study report.

In early August 2015, the Committee shared a draft of its report with the Yale-NUS faculty. This draft included data, analysis, results, and potential alternatives or proposals, but stopped short of presenting specific recommendations. All faculty members were given an opportunity to review and discuss the draft report in one of four faculty discussion sessions in late August. Likewise, the Committee elicited
feedback on key issues raised by the report from students via the Student Advisory Group to the Dean of Faculty. The students compiled data that they had collected over the previous year, analysed the data, and summarised it in a report. Following this period of discussion, Committee members met again in a short retreat to discuss input from faculty and students and to draft the recommendations based on stakeholder feedback. This final version of the Self-Study Report, now including the recommendations listed below, was submitted to President Lewis in mid-September. The submission of this report concluded Phase 1 of the review process.

External review process: Phase 2 (as of November 2015)

The Committee’s understanding of the second and third phases of the review process can be summarized as follows. The External Review Panel will review the report and meet in mid-October to discuss it. The Committee will also meet with the Panel to provide additional information and clarify any questions or concerns of the Panel members. The Panel is also expected to meet with groups of students, faculty and other stakeholders. Based on these discussions and its findings, the Panel will generate its own report, including recommendations. After the Panel submits its report to President Lewis, he will ask the full faculty for discussion. These discussions will be focused on a set of resolutions based on the report of the Review Panel. The first reading of the resolutions will take place at a faculty meeting in November.

The President will then submit the Panel’s report, and the self-study report, along with any relevant comments from himself or conveyed from the faculty, to the Yale-NUS Governing Board for the Board’s review and recommendations in early December. In January of 2016, the faculty will continue its deliberations on the resolutions presented in November, now informed by comments and recommendations emanating from the Governing Board, who may ask the faculty to consider amendments to the resolutions. The adoption by the faculty of resolutions modifying the common curriculum will conclude the second phase of the review process. The third phase of implementation will then begin, presumably culminating in changes to the common curriculum, most of which will be implemented for delivery in academic year 2016-17 and come into full force for the class of 2020.

Recommendations

Here the Committee collects the recommendations from the report. The specific recommendations are given in bold face, with a paragraph or two of explanatory material. The Committee’s recommendations come in two categories. The first has to do with process and the convergence and coordination between the courses. The second has to do with the structure and specific content of the Common Curriculum and related courses elsewhere in the curriculum.

A. Process recommendations

The Committee recommends that the College should generate specific processes and schedules for future reviews of the Common Curriculum and other aspects of the curriculum in order to institutionalize a culture of reflection and innovation at the College. There will need to be some planning and balance so that formal reviews happen in a timely but not overly time consuming way. Individual courses will still be reviewed each year by the teaching team, generating a Facilitator’s report.

The Committee recommends that the College develop material relating to the Common Curriculum across the College community. Measures already under development include “This Week in the Common Curriculum”, which has already met with enthusiasm, and posting and archiving syllabi and facilitators reports on the Faculty Portal.

The Committee recommends that course facilitators and teaching teams coordinate with other teaching teams during the review and renewal phase of course development. Currently there is relatively little contact between courses at the crucial phase when the new teaching team takes over from that of the previous year. If coordination and convergence are to be enhanced, this phase of development must be included in the process.

The Committee recommends the development of more robust scaffolding for a range of skills and modes of thought across the Common Curriculum. By “scaffolding” the Committee means tight connections between individual courses so that the relevant skills and areas are developed in a coordinated manner, with each course contributing in a way that enhances the contribution of the others.
Particular skills and areas include writing, historical consciousness, quantitative reasoning, and visual and oral communication. History is addressed in more detail in another recommendation. Quantitative reasoning will require particular attention – the teaching team hopes that QR will address specific areas that have already been discussed in a more qualitative way in SI and CSI, and that S4S will make use of the skills developed in QR. This kind of scaffolding will require some compromises in the content of individual courses, but the teaching team believes the result will be a stronger overall program.

The Committee recommends continued monitoring of grading and assessment practices within and between courses in order to build student confidence in grading and assessment, and to guard against inconsistencies and unjustifiable divergences in grading. Data from the most recent semester of the College is encouraging in this regard, as it appears that practices are converging across the Common Curriculum and the College generally. However, continued vigilance is called for, with the goal of not only being fair, and appearing to students to be fair.

The Committee recommends the creation of the position of Chair of the Council of Course Facilitators. This position would replace the current three Heads of Study for the Common Curriculum. The Chair would work with the Course Facilitators of the individual Common Curriculum courses to detect and facilitate points of convergence in course content and learning goals. As such, the Chair should not be a Facilitator of any of the courses. The Chair would speak for the goals of the Common Curriculum as a whole as the individual courses are developed and delivered. The Chair would track the implementation of these recommendations as approved by the faculty, as well as other future goals for the Common Curriculum that may be adopted in the future. Key activities not within the purview of the Chair would include making teaching assignments, which would remain with the Division Directors, and participating directly in developing the content of the courses, which would remain in the hands of the teaching team under the leadership of the Course Facilitator.

The Committee recommends that the College adopt clear policies for the rotation of faculty in and out of the teaching teams and leadership of the Common Curriculum, in accordance with the principles recommended above. These principles include:

- An expectation that all tenured and tenure-track faculty teach regularly in the Common Curriculum.
- An expectation that no faculty should teach exclusively in the Common Curriculum.
- An expectation that the precise balance of Common Curriculum versus major/elective courses will not be the same for all faculty.
- An aspiration that new faculty, particularly junior faculty, will be given an opportunity to work their way into the Common Curriculum.
- A commitment to a system of faculty rotation of service in the Common Curriculum.

B. Structure and Content of the Common Curriculum

The Committee recommends that the Common Curriculum be reduced from its current size of 12 or 13 courses to 10 courses. This change would be accomplished by reducing the number of courses in the 3rd and 4th year from two to one, and reducing the size of the science requirement, as described in more detail below. The Committee would strongly recommend against reducing the science requirement if no reductions in other areas of the Common Curriculum were made. The most straightforward interpretation of these changes is that the Common Curriculum would consist of four common experience courses in the first semester (LH 1, PPT 1, SI, CSI), three in the second semester (QR, LH 2, PPT 2), and two in the second year (MST, S4S), plus one requirement in either the 3rd or 4th year. The two second year courses would logically fall in the first semester, but this makes the Common Curriculum teaching requirements for the Social Science and Science Divisions highly unbalanced, in that each Division would likely contribute the primary teaching staff for two Common Curriculum courses in the first semester, but have only a share QR in the second semester. Thus, the possibility of running MST and S4S in both semesters, and giving students the choice of when to take them might be considered.

The Committee recommends that Integrated Science and Foundations of Science be replaced by a single common experience course in the second year, focusing on the scientific underpinnings of current societal problems. The Committee tentatively entitle this course “Science for Society” (S4S). All students would take this course, regardless of their previous science experience. The course would focus purely on
the scientific issues, and not on the political, social or cultural issues involved in these problems. It should use tools and concepts developed in SI and QR, and thus be more advanced than would be possible in the first year. Ideally, S4S would mirror the way that MST builds on the first year courses, and strengthen and enhance the learning goals of the Common Curriculum as a whole.

The Committee recommends that students be required to take either Historical Immersion (HI) or Current Issues (CI) in Years 3 and/or 4. The Committee recommends that the Common Curriculum retain these courses, but that students be required to take only one of these courses in Years 3 and 4. This has the effect of reducing the Common Curriculum by one course in years 3 and 4, allowing an increase in the size of the majors or in electives. The Committee also recommend that CI and HI be reviewed again in two years after the initial cohort has graduated. Our members recommend the development of instruments to study how well these courses are fulfilling the goals the Committee has set for them, so that this future review can be effective, points of convergence in course content and learning goals.

The Committee recommends that the College develop pathways, including summer study opportunities with recommended programmes, to support the acquisition of language skills, and that the use of such skills be incorporated more explicitly into relevant majors. Since the Committee does not recommend the creation of a first semester elective, the College must find other ways to foster language study. A particular approach would be to identify appropriate summer programmes that will fit the non-standard sequences of study that our students will need to follow. At the same time, an expansion of the majors should allow the explicit development of academic programmes and pathways that include use of languages other than English. Students who are following such a pathway should be given high priority for resources that will enable them to make progress as quickly as possible.

The Committee recommends that the College deliberately support the creation and delivery of elective courses that address academic goals that lie outside the purview of the Common Curriculum and the majors, and at levels appropriate to encourage broad access to students of all backgrounds. Examples of such courses might include, but are not limited to, the creative arts, introductory courses in skills such as computer programming, and truly interdisciplinary seminars. Such support might include consideration of such courses when the disciplinary balance of faculty slots is determined, support through the Teaching & Learning Centre and the Dean of Faculty office for development of such courses, and, in the case of interdisciplinary courses, support on a limited and perhaps competitive basis, for teaching credit for more than one faculty member to develop and deliver a course.

The Committee recommends that history be incorporated more intentionally into the common experience courses of the first and second year. In particular, the Committee suggests the following rough sequence of actions:

1. The historians should meet to develop learning goals for history in the common experience courses.
2. The teaching teams should develop ways to incorporate these learning goals into their syllabi. It would be useful for the relevant teaching teams to include historians, and when appropriate be led by historians, as this process occurs.
3. The chair of the council of facilitators, or some other central figure, should convene a group including historians and the relevant course facilitators, to examine “history across the curriculum” to ensure that the combination of activities generated across the Common Curriculum is appropriate. This would be an ad hoc group, but the issue should be revisited whenever relevant modifications are made to any of the courses.

Beyond this, efforts should be made on a curriculum wide basis to create tools that will help students and faculty combat historical illiteracy. One example might be the creation of annotated timelines for each of the major civilisations studied in the Common Curriculum, which could be referred to in lectures and discussions.

Submitted by:
Bryan Garsten, Co-Chair; Tan Tai Yong, Co-Chair; Steven Bernasek, Marvin Chun, Tina Lu, Paul Matsudaira, Terry Nardin, John Richardson, David Skelly
November 10, 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The External Review Panel (ERP) comprised nine faculty members from the National University of Singapore, Yale University, and Yale-NUS College. The Panel reviewed an extensive Self-Study Report prepared by the College’s internal Self-Study Committee, and visited the College for four days during which it held seventeen meetings with various groups of faculty, students, and the Self-Study Committee.

The Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS College is an impressive initiative in higher education. The devotion to the project among faculty, students and staff was evident to the ERP, as was the astonishing energy and intelligence that is being continually invested in its improvement. Based on the evidence presented, the ERP’s overall assessment of the Common Curriculum was strongly positive.

On the basis of the Self-Study Report and its own deliberations, the ERP recommends a number of changes for the College’s consideration. Most significantly, the ERP recommends the creation of a new administrative position in the faculty to oversee the Common Curriculum, insuring its integrity and its continued centrality to the institution. The ERP believes that the administrative structure of the College should better reflect the fact that the Common Curriculum is crucial to the distinctiveness and comparative advantage of the College. It suggests that the President be empowered to appoint a Director of the Common Curriculum (DCC), with a status and role equivalent to that of the Directors of the Science, Social Science, and Humanities Divisions. Like the Divisional Directors, the DCC would have significant influence in coordination among courses, faculty hiring and promotion, assessment, grading, staffing, and related matters.

In addition, the ERP recommends that the Common Curriculum be reduced from 12 to 10 courses by making the following changes:

I. Convert the Current Issues courses to electives, removing the Current Issues requirement from the Common Curriculum;
II. Convert Historical Immersion into a truly common course, taught by an interdisciplinary team of faculty members. It also strongly recommends integrating historical perspectives into the other Common Curriculum courses, including Philosophy and Political Thought (PPT), Literature and Humanities (LH), and Scientific Inquiry (SI);
III. Remove Integrated Science from the Common Curriculum, turning it into a course or courses that might be usefully considered as a possible requirement for multiple science majors;
IV. Require all students to take the same set of Common Curriculum courses in the sciences: Scientific Inquiry, Quantitative Reasoning, and a new course based partly on successful innovations to Foundations of Science.

DETAILED REPORT

I. Introduction

In October 2015, the External Review Panel (hereafter referred to as the “ERP” or “Panel”) made up of nine faculty members from National University of Singapore, Yale University and Yale-NUS College convened at the College to review the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum. Before convening, members reviewed a Common Curriculum Self-Study Report authored by an internal review committee, the Common Curriculum Self-Study Committee (hereafter referred to as the “Committee”).

The Panel commends the Committee for a conscientious and careful study of the Common Curriculum. The Self-Study Report contained thorough, incisive and honest assessments of the state of the Common Curriculum, with constructive recommendations for its improvement. The report also provided the Panel with a detailed and substantial document on which to rely as it undertook its own evaluation.

During its visit to the College, the Panel met with various stakeholders, including Yale-NUS faculty from the three divisions, area-specific faculty (the sciences, history
and languages), two student groups, the College’s senior leadership, and the Yale-NUS Governing Board. The Panel also met twice with the Committee, once to foreground discussions with various stakeholders, and a second time to clarify outstanding questions. In total, the Panel held seventeen meetings over a four-day period, culminating in a meeting with College President Pericles Lewis to present initial thoughts concerning the Common Curriculum. The following report is the Panel’s findings concerning the Yale-NUS Common Curriculum.

II. Observations

The ERP believes that the Common Curriculum at Yale-NUS College is an impressive initiative in higher education. The devotion to the project among faculty, students and staff was evident, as was the astonishing energy and intelligence that is constantly being invested in its improvement. The Self-Study Report demonstrated the high level of sophistication about education and pedagogy that involvement in the Common Curriculum has generated among faculty and staff. Comments by students reflecting on their education also enormously impressed the ERP; one Panel member noted that the high quality of students’ remarks may itself be a sign that the Common Curriculum (along with the Admissions team) is doing its work well.

The ERP did not have access to quantitative data of any kind that would support a final judgment about the success of the Common Curriculum. Moreover, the ERP feels that its review is coming quite early in the history of this new curriculum, making any definitive judgment impossible. Nevertheless, the Panel found many reasons to believe that the Common Curriculum is on the path towards long-term success, and the ERP heard moving stories indicating the impact that parts of the curriculum have already had on particular students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Literature & Humanities (LH), Philosophy & Political Thought (PPT), Comparative Social Institutions (CSI) and Modern Social Thought (MST) are especially well received by students.

The Self-Study Committee voiced the concern that no one faculty member could have sufficiently broad academic mastery to effectively inhabit such a position. After some consideration, we do not agree that such broad mastery is necessary. The DCC would not be an academic expert in all fields, but an advocate for the Common Curriculum who would work to make sure that the right faculty are in place to teach and revise the courses and that successful innovations to improve student experience are not lost as course staffing turns over. Most critically, a ‘Director’ is needed as a counterweight to the divisional structure and disciplinary allegiances.

In an effort to be useful, the ERP will devote most of its attention in this report to the areas of concern raised by the Self-Study Committee. The next part of the report contains specific responses to the recommendations enumerated on pages 5 and 6 of the Self-Study.

III. Recommendations

1) The most important recommendation of the Panel is to create a new administrative position in the faculty, a Director of the Common Curriculum (hereafter DCC), with status and authority equal to that of the Divisional Directors. With the creation of this position, the administrative structure of the College would better reflect its curricular priorities. The distinctiveness and comparative advantage of Yale-NUS College in the educational ecosystem of Singapore and indeed of the world consists partly in its organisation around a Common Curriculum. The success of that curriculum is therefore crucial to the success of the College. The creation of a strong DCC position would place one of the College’s defining attributes under the focused care of someone with sufficient authority and resources to see to its continued health and integrity.

The Self-Study Committee voiced the concern that no one faculty member could have sufficiently broad academic mastery to effectively inhabit such a position. After some consideration, we do not agree that such broad mastery is necessary. The DCC would not be an academic expert in all fields, but an advocate for the Common Curriculum who would work to make sure that the right faculty are in place to teach and revise the courses and that successful innovations to improve student experience are not lost as course staffing turns over. Most critically, a ‘Director’ is needed as a counterweight to the divisional structure and disciplinary allegiances.

The Panel recognises that the addition of this directorship may foster tension in allocating resources, human and otherwise, between the Common Curriculum and the majors, between the divisional Directors and the DCC. That tension is inherent in the curriculum and cannot be eliminated. Various tendencies will inevitably threaten to erode the Common Curriculum over time. These influences include the demands for earlier specialisation, for flexibility in choosing electives, and for earlier language study; the vocational concerns of students and their parents; and the influx of new faculty members without experience in shaping the Common Curriculum. The Panel felt quite strongly that without the institutionalisation of a strong advocate, the Common Curriculum was likely to decay in vitality and importance.
The Panel fully endorses the need for better coordination among the various parts of the Common Curriculum (Self-Study recommendations #1-5). The ERP believes that a DCC would be well-positioned to organise and guide this coordination. Course Facilitators of each Common Curriculum course should not have the ability to revise the course in accordance with their particular academic predilections, as the Common Curriculum is meant to be a project of the faculty body as a whole. A DCC would work with Course Facilitators to insure an evolution of the curriculum that allows for revision while maintaining the consistency over time that is a part of such a curriculum’s distinct character.

A DCC would be expected to participate in decisions about the hiring and promotion of faculty in the same way that Directors of the Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities Divisions do. In that context, the DCC would have primary responsibility to speak about the contributions that particular candidates have made, or could make, to the Common Curriculum.

A DCC would coordinate the development of a system for evaluating the success of Common Curriculum courses and of the various pedagogical experiments that go on within them. He or she would insure that successes are not lost in the midst of staffing changes, and that mistakes of the past are not repeated.

A DCC would work with the Divisional Directors on the allocation of faculty teaching responsibilities. Two considerations need to be balanced: On the one hand, there are clear advantages to allowing some faculty to focus their talents and energies on parts of the Common Curriculum for extended periods of time, developing their expertise, and improving the courses. An inflexible system of “rotation” that would interfere with this commitment would be detrimental. On the other hand, widespread faculty involvement in the Common Curriculum is important to maintaining the sense of that curriculum as a common project, rather than a preserve of a few loyalists. Such involvement is also part of shaping a faculty whose members are able to benefit professionally from working outside a narrowly specialised field and who share a broad vision of liberal education. The Panel believes that a DCC could help to manage the balance between common and divisional teaching over time.

A DCC would collect information about the distribution of grades across sections of Common Curriculum courses and among the courses, and would facilitate reflection among the faculty about the shape of those distributions, to insure the fairness of grades and their pedagogical usefulness.

A DCC would lead efforts to make the Common Curriculum a project in which many faculty members would wish to participate and one that could serve as a model for other liberal arts colleges. One member of our Panel notes that using the language of “rotation” to describe faculty involvement might suggest a “rotation of duty” to serve in the Common Curriculum, as if teaching in it were a chore. Instead, the College and the DCC should aim to make it possible for faculty to view their time in the Common Curriculum as an exciting chance to work differently with colleagues and students, to learn fresh material, and to indulge curiosity in a way that renews their enthusiasm for learning and teaching.

2) The Panel concurs with the Self-Study Committee that the Science portion of the current Common Curriculum has a number of weaknesses. We treat each Common Curriculum Science course separately below:

**Scientific Inquiry**

Some members of the Committee felt that this course was generally successful. The instructors have been responsive to student input and have substantially modified the course each year. At the same time, some students seemed to feel that significant problems remained. Much of the substantially modified the course each year. At the same time, some students seemed to feel that significant problems remained. Much of the concern expressed was related initially to very broad coverage; it seems that the course tried to cover too many separate topics and examples. Even in the second iteration, the learning outcomes seemed not to have been clearly communicated to some students. In particular, students expected a pure science course, rather than a course in which scientific content would be integrated with some reflection about what science is.

The Panel recommends that Scientific Inquiry (SI) embrace an approach that includes both scientific content and reflection on the meaning of science. In practice, this would mean allowing faculty from history, philosophy and other fields to play some role in the development and teaching of parts of the course. Some members of the Panel note, in particular, opportunities to link Scientific Inquiry with the parts of
Quantitative Reasoning

Quantitative Reasoning (QR) has also evolved over the two years it has been delivered, and changes are in place for the third offering of the course in the upcoming semester. The Panel notes its successes, including the efforts to include material and skills that will be useful and interesting to all students, not just those focused on science or mathematics. We also note, however, difficulties in coordination among groups and in consistency in grading.

The Panel discussed the possibility of offering QR in the first semester and moving SI to the second semester. This might have the advantage of increasing the emphasis on quantitative skills, and would perhaps align the philosophy and epistemology elements of SI with the developments in literature, the arts, philosophy, and political and social changes discussed in the second term of the other Common Curriculum courses. It would, however, move SI into a term in which grades are assigned, which has some disadvantages. There is also a sense that the current arrangement is working and perhaps should not be changed. The Panel therefore recommends that QR should continue to be offered in the second term.

The Panel also recommends that the College considers building on current efforts to support quantitative skills across the curriculum by providing support comparable to that provided for improving writing skills.

Foundations of Science and Integrated Science

The Panel noted the difficulty in teaching these courses, and a sense of student dissatisfaction with them, in part owing to the broad range of backgrounds that both sets of student clientele exhibited. In the case of Foundations of Science (FoS), a course designed for non-science students, the range of scientific content knowledge and mathematics skills among incoming students was quite broad. In the case of Integrated Science (IS), the range of disciplinary backgrounds and interests was equally broad; students who focused on the physical sciences were very capable and content savvy in the physical sciences, but had little knowledge of the life sciences, and vice-versa. Thus, both courses suffered from difficulties in presenting cohesive course material by the faculty involved, as well as difficulties for the students in determining what was expected of them. The Panel also agreed with the Committee in its belief that the split into two tracks compromises on the original principle of the Common Curriculum, which is to give the students a common experience.

For these reasons, the Panel recommends that IS and FoS be replaced by a single course created for all students, to be delivered in the first semester of the second year. The Panel's brainstorming yielded one possible course title: “Science, Technology and Innovation,” which would capture the desire for a course that is full of content but also clear in its relation to the practical world.

The Panel recognises that creating a single course for all students would increase the diversity of preparation among students. The College should undertake efforts to acknowledge the differences that students will bring into the class and provide structures and resources that will ensure success for all students. It may make sense to stratify sections according to students’ backgrounds or aptitudes and to create support resources outside the classroom. Solving this problem is a priority if the Common Curriculum is to offer a model to other institutions that a common experience in the sciences is indeed a real possibility. It may help, in devising this course, to remember that Common Curriculum courses are not meant to prepare students for their majors in the sciences, but that they are meant to challenge all students, even those with significant preparation in one area of science.

The Panel recognises that many of the innovations now found in FoS may be appropriate for the new course proposed, and would suggest integrating the most successful products of the work that has been invested in Foundations.

The Panel also recognises that IS offers an exciting possibility for students in the sciences, and suggests that faculty members explore the idea of re-fitting the course to become a requirement that might serve multiple science majors. The development of this course promises to be an important innovation, and would be a
worthwhile investment of both faculty time and College resources.

3) The Panel recognises that the Common Curriculum, in its original design and as implemented to date, has not provided students with a strong or sophisticated historical understanding of human societies and the ways in which they change. It also recognises that the “menus of courses” for Historical Immersion (HI) and Contemporary Issues (CI) fail to provide the “common experience” offered by earlier parts of the Common Curriculum. The Panel therefore recommends dropping the CI courses from the common experience (turning them into electives instead) and converting HI into a truly common experience for all students in the third or fourth year.

The Panel noted that students are arriving in the College with less general historical knowledge than was anticipated. Most lack an internalized timeline of world and regional events, and some lack familiarity even with such key developments as twentieth-century totalitarianism. Early planning did not account for the fact that Singaporean secondary schools do not require the study of history. There have been attempts to address this, especially in Literature & Humanities (LH) 1&2, with some tutors, for instance, having their students construct timelines from primary sources. However, despite such moves, the Common Curriculum as a whole does not provide students with the general historical knowledge or the feel for history expected of an educated person.

The emphasis on philosophy, literature, social science and science in the Common Curriculum has left little space for consideration of the construction of historical knowledge. Students have few opportunities to learn how knowledge of the past can be inferred from sources, what different kinds of inference can be made, or how sources are always limited. Again, the attempts to address this, though of great value in themselves, appear to have been uneven and ineffective in altering the Common Curriculum as a whole.

The perceived inadequacy of the historical elements in LH, PPT and FoS courses seems to have had an impact on HI. These courses have been reconceived as intensive history courses, in an effort to make up for lost ground earlier in the Common Curriculum. Thus they have become, essentially, history courses, designed and taught by historians, leaving students confused about the way in which they deserve to be a part of the common and interdisciplinary curriculum for all. The Panel recommends that the Yale-NUS faculty consider tackling these problems both by re-orienting the earlier Common Curriculum courses (LH, PPT, QR and SI) and by re-thinking HI.

The earlier courses should aim to include at least some instruction on the sequence of major events related to their content, to develop some understanding of the construction of history, and to link different areas of knowledge by pointing out their shared situatedness in common historical eras or moments. To achieve these goals it would be necessary to rethink parts of the courses, to systematically include historians among the teaching and design teams for these courses, and to ensure that students are held responsible for learning the important historical material in the same ways that they must learn other material, i.e. through assessment of their learning.

The Panel suggests that the HI part of the Common Curriculum be reconfigured to be more like the earlier parts, in several ways. Instead of offering a menu of options, the faculty should create interdisciplinary teams to create and teach just one or two HI courses, making them a truly common experience in the way that earlier parts of the Common Curriculum were. The ERP also notes that these courses should take special advantage of the fact that students have completed earlier parts of the Common Curriculum and have begun the specialisation of their majors. We believe that this would better reflect the original purpose of projecting the Common Curriculum into the third year. Possible modules might include topics such as “The Age of Galileo” or “Southeast Asian Migrations.” In the model of the other Common Curriculum modules, the class should largely be taught in multiple sections, with content retained from year to year, thus making curriculum development less onerous.

4) The Panel agrees with the Self-Study Committee’s observations that it is desirable to open space in the second semester of the first year for students to take an elective. The proposals above would achieve this result by reducing the number of Common Curriculum courses from 12 to 10.

The Panel notes the concerns from language instructors regarding the opportunity for students to access language training as early as possible. After some discussion,
the ERP concluded that the costs of opening space for this in the first semester of the Common Curriculum were too high, and also shared concerns about students overloading during that semester. The Panel suggests instead that the College make provision (and provide the necessary resources) for interested students to start language training during the vacation period following their first semester and for students to continue it at the end of their first year, to be in a position to enter second-year language courses at the right level.

5) The Self-Study Committee points out that grading and assessment disparities across courses and sections have appeared in parts of the Common Curriculum, a fact particularly distressing to students. The Panel believes that this is a function of the startup mode of the program, and is reassured to hear that the problem is being addressed. The ERP emphasises the importance of resolving these disparities but believe that a dedicated Director of the Common Curriculum will be in a position to be helpful on this matter.

Concluding Remarks

The Common Curriculum is central to the character and vision of Yale-NUS College and is an important innovation in liberal education. Given its importance, the Common Curriculum should be supported in ways that will help to preserve it over time while allowing it to change in response to experience. These supports should include creating the position of a Director of the Common Curriculum (DCC) to oversee and speak for the program. The DCC should be given a significant opportunity to communicate to students about the purposes of the Common Curriculum during Freshmen Orientation, and should similarly be involved in talking to new faculty members about their potential roles as soon as they arrive. The beginning of each Common Curriculum course should include a clear statement of its role in the whole experience and of its learning goals, so that students do not find themselves confused by the multidisciplinarity they encounter. The Panel also notes that new faculty members can be integrated into the social and intellectual fabric of the College partly by teaching in the Common Curriculum and helping to keep its content vital.