Academic freedom in New Haven and S’pore

BY SIMON CHESTERMAN FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

On APRIL 5, Yale faculty will vote on a resolution challenging Yale—NUS College, the liberal arts programme that will admit its first students in August 2013. The resolution reflects three distinct concerns about the joint venture. The first is an internal matter to Yale and relates to the decision not to seek a formal vote on Yale—NUS College before it was launched. The second is that Singapore’s laws and politics are different from those of the United States and less protective of civil liberties. The third, but often conflated with the second, is uncertainty as to whether academic freedom is respected in Singapore.

Whether the resolution is passed or not, it raises important questions about the relationship between academic freedom and the wider legal and political climate. It also suggests the extent to which academic freedom is a misunderstood concept — even, it seems, by some academicians.

What, then, does academic freedom mean? Given the present context, it may be appropriate to cite the statement of the American Association of University Professors, most recently updated in 1990. This acknowledged that academic freedom entails certain rights — but it also comes with responsibilities and requires an understanding of context.

The rights generally associated with academic freedom are that teaching and research should be conducted without unreasonable interference or restriction by the law, institutional regulations, or public pressure. The qualification “unreasonable” is important as this is not an absolute right. Academic freedom does not entitle you to experiment on non-consenting human subjects. An academic who falsifies results should expect disciplinary action; one who does not show up for class should not expect to get a promotion or a pay raise.

But beyond such clear cases, professors should be free — and encouraged — to pursue the truth wherever it leads. There are many examples of what happens in the absence of such freedom. Think astronomy under the Catholic Church at the time of Galileo, or biology in the Soviet Union.

In 2007, I helped New York University (NYU) School of Law launch its Singapore Master of Laws programme, another international partnership with the National University of Singapore. Some NYU faculty had expressed the same concerns about academic freedom currently being debated by Yale professors.

Over the past five years, NYU faculty have experienced no problems in teaching just as they would in New York — including on subjects such as human rights and the death penalty.

NYU visitors currently teach alongside permanent faculty at NUS Law who also work on these and other potentially controversial topics, such as free speech and the Internal Security Act. Both sets of professors — and all their students — profit from the collegial environment that we have created.

The ability to research and teach in such an environment should, however, be distinguished from the ability to organise a protest march on the street or to attack the personal integrity of an individual policymaker or judge — although Singapore’s laws on unlawful assembly and defamation are themselves the topic of on-going research.

Similarly, the remnants of the British colonial prohibitions on homosexual conduct, though no longer proactively enforced, concern many gay and straight Singaporeans — and are also properly the subject of lively debate within academia and elsewhere.

The responsibilities associated with academic freedom include recognising that it is a privilege justified by expertise, not a licence to exploit a soapbox. Professors, like everyone else, have opinions. But outside of one’s field of expertise or opinion is no more — and no less — valuable than that of anyone else.

This in turn suggests the importance of context. There is no question that Singapore’s political climate is different from New Haven’s. At various points it has been implied that this might stifle debate on the Yale—NUS campus. Such vague assertions are impossible to prove, but would also establish an impossible standard not of “unreasonable interference” but “potential influence”.

Taken seriously, one might equally argue that political correctness in the United States stifles debate on issues such as gender and race, and that conservative political forces limit teaching and research in areas from evolution to stem cells.

Having taught in various countries around the world, my own experience is that every university operates within a larger social context.

Indeed, probably the greatest threat to academic freedom experienced by NYU’s Law School in recent years came not in Singapore but in France, where a professor was forced to defend himself against an accusation of criminal libel over a mildly critical book review. (He won.)

This is not to say that Singapore is perfect. Some academics choose not to focus their research on sensitive subjects. But many do. And in doing so, they help push at the limits of knowledge and cultivate among our students the curiosity and creativity that is essential in an information-based world.

Yale — which, for what it’s worth, already has partnerships with China and Saudi Arabia — will make a significant contribution to the development of academia in Singapore, if not through the NYU liberal arts college, which might see this as an eminently appropriate role for a university named after a family who earned his fortune as a governor of the East India Company.

But the Yale faculty who teach here will also learn from the students and colleagues with whom they interact, and from working in an environment that reflects the diversity of worlds held by the people of our shrinking globe.

So is Singapore the same as New Haven? No. But then again, that’s the whole point.

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