S’poreans at Yale clear air on freedom

They relate own experiences in S’pore in closed-door dialogue to counter misperceptions

BY MATTHEW ONG & SOW E CHEE

WHEN Ms Ng E-Ching was studying General Paper at a top junior college in Singapore, she would give controversial articles, even one from a banned magazine, to her students for discussion.

The way she steered them through it, the students of Yale-NUS College would say, was unique.

Yale-NUS, a joint venture of Yale University and the National University of Singapore, was established to provide a liberal arts education in Singapore.

Ms Ng, who also did her undergraduate arts degree at the university, again pointed out that in Singapore, “experience of academic freedom is very highly dependent on your introduction.”

She made the point at a closed-door dialogue at Yale University in the United States early last year involving about 50 students and faculty members, she told The Straits Times later.

The Yale-NUS students were one of three multi-ethnic groups who had been dialogue-organised by Ms Ng and other Singaporean Yale students and alumni.

It was held to counter what many see as simplistic and stereotyped views of Singapore held by some members of the Yale community.

Singaporeans who have attended these events have expressed their appreciation.

The exchange follows a resolution passed by the Yale faculty two weeks ago, calling for student freedom to be guaranteed at the new Yale-NUS college in Singapore due to open next year.

The university said it had not agreed to a statement that appeared when the joint venture was announced in 2010, but that students’ dialogue, was “far too one-sided, and more adversarial, and more injurious.”

Questions to the five Singaporean panelists sought to find out the impact of foreign student quotas on student diversity, and the challenges of the university in upholding America’s constitutional protection of free speech.

A faculty member was concerned that the new college may not be diverse enough, as the foreign student number is capped at 5 per cent of the cohort.

Yale-NUS dean of admissions Jeremiah Quinlan said there was no quota.

He said the cap applied to NUS as a whole, not to Yale-NUS in particular, “but as individual faculties at NUS might have different compositions of their student bodies, we too can’t Yale-NUS.”

A Singaporean dean, who spoke of the reactions of students with the Singaporeans, with the exact composition determined by the quality of the applicant.

On whether a liberal arts college can take off in Singapore, Ms Ng said many in Singapore still saw the arts as a “second-class option” and outside “liberal arts” for being both liberal and artific.

Ms Ng said she was glad to see her own position of Singaporean perspectives being dispelled.

“Our students showed that they have the same ideas, the same feelings, the same perceptions.

Her brother Y-Bestia, 18, a writer who took part via video-conferencing from Singapore, found the atmosphere cordial, “The sense I got is that everyone was just interested.”

He said that the Yale-NUS students were “so open-minded they would support the line behind it. “I wanted to add the Singaporean perspective to dispel any misconception that is disproportionately American.”