An unreal Yale-NUS divide

The robust exchange of views over the proposed Yale-National University of Singapore (NUS) College pits several members of the Yale faculty, who are worried over the degree of political freedom in Singapore, against those upholding Singapore’s right to its own way of life. This is a false dichotomy. The key development is the passage of a resolution by the faculty of the Ivy League institution expressing concern over “the history of lack of respect for civil and political rights in the state of Singapore”. Although that resolution will not derail work to set up the Yale-NUS College next year, it has incensed those who see it as belittling Singapore’s achievements as a nation. They have hit back at what they see as a typical American attitude, parochial and imperial in equal measure, which seeks to enforce domestic political standards around the world.

This is needless. Singaporeans should take in their stride the critical assessment of some Yale faculty as just that – opinion. Those with first-hand knowledge of how Singapore works might disagree with them, but those who are familiar with Western academic communities will understand that disagreement, open debate and advocacy of all stripes are just part of everyday life.

The college, which will attract both Singaporeans and foreigners – including Americans, no doubt – will provide some common ground on which some of the best young minds of today can meet to explore the value of difference. American students will be exposed to the geopolitical realities that shape social and political attitudes in a small state. For Singapore students, Yale-NUS will provide another avenue for their engagement with the world at large. This is happening already in the existing universities, but the character of Yale-NUS as a liberal arts college should help sharpen Singaporeans’ awareness of the worth of greater intellectual diversity and deeper cross-fertilisation of ideas.

It might even be the case that differences within national systems will come to the fore as Singaporean and foreign students study together. Students will learn to appreciate the political and cultural nuances that make generalisations about countries wrong and dangerous. Thus, the East Coast liberalism exemplified by Yale is not representative of Middle America, any more than the average Singaporean is a docile devotee of materialism and authoritarianism. There are American conservatives and Singaporean liberals – and vice versa. Yale-NUS should bring them, and others, together.