Yale-NUS saga: ‘Reality is always more complex’

But US varsity head says tie-up has solid support of governing body

Yale University President Richard Levin had his own learning moment recently.

In an interview with The Straits Times at its campus in New Haven, Connecticut, he says more could have been done to avoid the faculty fracas over the Yale-National University of Singapore College last month.

The university faculty had voted 100 to 69 to pass a resolution expressing “concern regarding the history of lack of respect for civil and political rights in the state of Singapore”.

It also called on the planned Yale-NUS College to uphold principles of “non-discrimination for all... civil liberty and political freedom on campus and in the broader society”.

Although university officials moved swiftly to give the assurance that the resolution would not detail work to set up the Yale-NUS College next year, the resolution did incense many in Singapore who saw it as belittling Singapore’s achievements as a nation.

Some hit back to say the incident showed up the cultural arrogance of Americans seeking to enforce their own political standards and values on other nations.

Professor Levin, who started his academic career as a professor in Yale after completing his PhD in economics there in 1974, said plainly that the resolution, especially the first part, was “untrue and smacked of moral superiority”.

He had also opposed it on the grounds that it did not capture the mutual respect that has characterised the Yale-NUS collaboration from the beginning.

He revealed that he had proposed an amendment to delete the first sentence expressing concern about political and civil rights in Singapore, but it was defeated narrowly in a vote.

But he noted that the main players in the debate were the same people making the same points – a refrain heard in the small group of academics who raised the issue of academic freedom in September 2010, when officials first announced the project.

Two town-hall meetings held then for faculty to weigh in on the project were poorly attended.

“Despite the board’s support at that time, but for whatever reasons, there are more people who have come up to support them now,” said Prof Levin.

Added: “If faculty discontent could have intensified due to the other ... or even top-down decision-making, he conceded that “a number of people could have supported this resolution out of a general sense of unhappiness”.

In retrospect, more could have been done to get more faculty familiar and involved in the Singapore project.

“We have had something up ’till now of 60 members of the faculty involved in planning and discussion of the curriculum since we started work more than two years ago,” he said. “So there already is a substantial number of people who are familiar with the project, and many, if not most, are enthusiastic about that. So we need to widen the circle and get more of them to see that this is something worthwhile”.

For one thing, he added, Yale faculty would get to know what it is like to sit down and read the things that may have a particular political point of view, written from a certain perspective and find it persuasive.

“Reality is always more complex than simple ideologies”.

Still, he noted, robust debate and exchanges are part of everyday life in American university campus.

“Lively debate and discussion are a feature of American academic life. Constantly questioning the university’s values and programmes is a permanent feature of our academic life”.

“In fact, it is not unlike the pedagogical approach that Yale faculty take with their students and hope to convey at Yale-NUS”.

He emphasised that Singaporeans should not read the resolution as applying to the Yale-NUS liberal arts college, which is preparing to open in August and has begun soliciting faculty and students.

He noted that the Yale-NUS project has the solid support of the Yale Corporation, the governing body of the university, and some 50 to 60 faculty involved in the project.

There is a real commitment to being a major force in education in Asia, Singapore is also at the crossroads between China and India, and close to South-east Asia; in a way, in an ideal location for drawing students from the whole region. You will get a real mix of perspectives. If one were to go to China, it would have a larger Chinese experience. Similarly, if we were to go to India”.

On faculty recruitment for Yale-NUS College

“We are doing well in terms of attracting really impressive people from around the world.

We have had over 2,000 applicants and made over 30 offers.

We will shortly be releasing who’s who in this list. We have some really impressive people from around the world. Roughly half are from the US, a quarter from Singapore, another quarter from around the world.”

Why did Yale want to do this, despite the difficulties involved?

“It’s an opportunity to be a part of a historically important innovation in education. We hope to bring certain aspects of the American tradition of undergraded education, modifying and adapting them to an Asian context. It’s an ambitious project. What is at stake for Yale is an opportunity to do something really important in the world of global higher education.”