No topic off-limits, Yale-NUS report says

New liberal arts college won’t impose curbs on freedom of expression

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THE new Yale-National University of Singapore College of Liberal Arts has reiterated its stand on freedom of expression in a new document that sets out the thinking behind its curriculum.

“The unique merits of a liberal arts education will not be fully realised as long as students and faculty members mistakenly believe that some topics are off-limits and if debate and discussion on controversial subjects are not allowed, said the college.

“An education built upon the exchange of arguments can only be fully realised if students and faculty can articulate their thoughts and express them to the various publics that make up the college community... There are no questions that cannot be asked, no answers that cannot be discussed and debated.”

The 90-page report, authored by the six members of the committee headed by Yale professor of political science Bryan Garsten, goes on to say that the administration will not be instituting any speech restrictions. Instead, faculty members and students must judge for themselves the best manner in which to express their ideas, “determining the balance of sensitivity and provocation”.

The college added that it hopes to help students find this balance through its liberal arts education.

Academic freedom has been a hotly debated topic since the setting up of the college was announced in 2010, with critics—many from Yale, in Connecticut—voicing concern that Singapore will curb freedom of expression.

It culminated in Yale university academics passing a resolution in April last year expressing “concern regarding the history of lack of respect for civil and political rights” in Singapore. In response, the college officials have repeatedly expressed their commitment to academic freedom, while pointing out the rule of law in Singapore that must be followed. Students have been told that Yale-NUS, like other Singapore tertiary institutions, does not allow the formation of student political groups, political protests, campaigning or fund-raising on campus.

A Yale alumni who declined to be named said he was disappointed that the lengthy report only briefly addresses the issue of freedom of expression. “It has been the main issue, but so little is said about it. I would have liked to have heard more about how controversial topics will be dealt with in the curriculum.”

Prof Garsten, who chaired the committee, said faculty members have had extensive discussions over how to approach controversial material. The common curriculum all students will study includes time explicitly devoted to discussing controversial topics, which officials have previously said will include topics like the death penalty and human rights.

“Learning to speak and listen about such matters is a part of a liberal education,” Prof Garsten told The Straits Times.

He said faculty members at Yale-NUS have been working on the curriculum in various working groups since July last year.

Among the issues discussed were the challenges facing liberal arts education in Asia, how best to teach science in a liberal arts college, and the importance of teaching students to speak up.

Students at the college will study a common curriculum that will straddle the social sciences, humanities and natural sciences. The report notes liberal arts colleges in the United States are known for their track record of producing PhDs in science and engineering.

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