Panel to advise Yale-NUS on academic issues

Group to give input on matters such as academic freedom, discrimination

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A PANEL of Yale and National University of Singapore academics and administrators will be appointed to advise the new liberal arts college on issues that may arise, including academic freedom and discrimination.

In response to queries from The Straits Times, Yale-NUS College said the panel – called the “Yale-NUS Consultative Group” – will be appointed by presidents of the NUS and Yale University.

It declined to say if anyone had been tapped to sit on the panel, just that it will be set up by August this year when classes start.

The two universities had faced controversy over the setting up of the college including concerns over human rights and academic freedom.

Yale academics passed a resolution in April last year expressing “concern regarding the history of lack of respect for civil and political rights” in Singapore.

Both institutions had promised the set-up of the panel in the founding charter of the college.

The group, comprising an equal number of faculty and administrative representatives from American-based Yale and NUS, will “provide advice on questions raised in the early years of the College by faculty, students, staff and administrators,” says the charter.

Issues raised by the Consultative Group will be brought up to the Governing Board on an annual basis.

Meanwhile in the US, a report by an 11-member committee formed to address Yale professors’ concerns about the Singaporean college called for the Yale-NUS Consultative Group to be set up as soon as possible.

In the report, presented before a Yale Faculty meeting last week, the committee said that since the college is due to open soon, “it is important to have the group in place to consider appeals for potential violations of academic freedom or non-discrimination”.

The report raised concern over Yale-NUS’ impact on Yale’s administrative and teaching resources.

It also called for phasing out the check box on the Yale application allowing applicants to automatically apply to Yale-NUS free of charge and without submitting any additional materials. The report said the policy “blurs the distinction between Yale-NUS and Yale”.

It also recommends the continuous involvement of the Yale faculty to review issues surrounding academic freedom, non-discrimination policies and faculty governance at Yale-NUS and to examine “the spheres of interaction between Yale, Yale-NUS and the broader society”.

Asked about the report, Yale-NUS college president Pericles Lewis thanked the committee for their efforts and for their recognition of the “substantial progress” that had been made in the setting up of the college.

The committee visited the college in January and interviewed some of the professors, students as well as Yale Alumni in Singapore.

Its report said it was impressed by how much was accomplished in a short period of time at the liberal arts college. “Yale-NUS College is on track to start classes in August 2013,” it said.

On the issues of academic freedom and non-discrimination raised by the Yale committee, Professor Lewis reiterated that academic freedom remains a “bedrock principle” of the college.

He said: “The college’s charter and policies contain strong protections for the scholarly work of faculty and students. We are planning a campus life full of open discussion and debate, which is a central part of the educational experience that a residential liberal arts college should provide.”

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