

Resolution on Procedures for Responding to Questions of Academic Freedom at Yale-NUS
Approved by the FAS Senate on December 10, 2019

The Yale FAS Senate stands ready to defend freedom of expression, especially on campus. In September and October 2019 the Senate was apprised of a controversy that may have involved a violation of freedom of expression at Yale-NUS. The Senate received requests from Linda Lim (M.A. 1973) and Jee Leong Koh (Singapore Unbound) that it conduct an inquiry into the episode. Having reviewed documents provided by them and others, the Senate met for approximately forty-five minutes to deliberate on October 11, 2019. This report very briefly summarizes the facts and our resolution.

On September 13, 2019, a one week Yale–NUS course “Dialogue and Dissent”, which had sixteen enrolled students, including nine non-Singaporean citizens, was cancelled, just a few weeks before it was to begin. The course was part of the Week-7 LABs (“Learning Across Boundaries” Program which was scheduled to run from September 29 to October 5.) The instructor, a Singaporean playwright named Alfian Sa’at, who had previously taught at Yale-NUS, was told the course lacked academic rigor and might pose a legal risk to the students.

Concerned about protecting academic freedom, Yale President Peter Salovey appointed Vice President Pericles Lewis, the first President of Yale-NUS, to fly to Singapore and investigate. On September 27, 2019 Professor Lewis filed his report, which concluded that Yale-NUS had handled the situation badly, but had reached the right decision, especially in view of the changes taking place in the course just before it was to begin. He found no evidence of government coercion in the decision. A standing committee of Yale faculty on Yale-NUS, which includes Senators Shiri Goren and Charles Schmuttenmaer, endorsed the report and its findings. On October 7, 2019 the Singaporean Minister of Education, Ong Ye Kung, gave a speech in the Parliament in which he denounced the course proposal and personally attacked the course instructor, Alfian Sa’at.

The Senate heard testimony about the report from Professor Lewis, and a critique of its findings from History of Art Professor Mimi Yiengpruksawan. Like Senior Counsel Harpreet Singh, who conducted an analysis of Vice President Lewis’s report, Professor Yiengpruksawan questioned Lewis’s ability to produce an objective and independent report. Another criticism was that it is difficult to prove that a one week course lacks academic rigor. Several faculty spoke from the floor, as did several Senators.

Resolution: The FAS Senate believes that the recent events at Yale-NUS raised important questions about some aspects of Yale’s ongoing relationship to Yale-NUS, and especially about how Yale should handle further episodes involving free speech and academic independence. We therefore recommend that Yale establish clear criteria and procedures to determine if and how Yale should publicly respond to any such events in the future. This would include recommendations for which parties should be consulted to determine if an investigation is warranted, and for the kind of personnel (whether from the administration, the faculty, or outside experts) that should be deemed appropriate and independent fact finders.

We recommend that President Salovey, in consultation with the Senate, appoint an ad hoc committee with faculty representatives from both Yale and Yale-NUS to develop and recommend such criteria and procedures. Yale committee members would include representatives from the Yale-NUS faculty advisory committee, the Faculty Senate, and other members of the Yale faculty. The Yale delegation would constitute a majority vote on the committee.

Their report might then be passed on to the Presidents of both institutions. The final decision about whether or not Yale should intervene would continue to lie with Yale's President, but the principles, guidelines and procedures set out by an ad hoc committee would both improve and legitimate Presidential decision-making.