

Is S'pore losing out on critical thinking now that Yale-NUS is closing?

The college is closing in 2025.

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Does Singapore promote critical thinking?

That was one of the questions posed at the Singapore Perspectives 2025 conference on Jan. 20 by an attendee who asked:

"A vibrant state clearly requires people who can think critically and pragmatically.

But are we seriously promoting this when our media avoids discussing many controversial issues and more importantly when initiatives like the Yale-NUS partnership was abandoned which was specifically aimed at promoting critical thinking?"

The Yale-NUS college is scheduled to close in 2025.

Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee, who also sits on the governing board of Yale-NUS, thinks that Singapore does promote critical thinking—with or without Yale-NUS.

"Yale-NUS does teach critical thinking, but so does NUS. So does NTU. So does SMU and SUTD. You know, I don't think we should assume that critical thinking is not there in our schools."

Professor Cherian George from the Hong Kong Baptist University countered with the observation that Singapore students and the public are not given the "freedom to practise" critical thinking, a skill that must be used over and over, like training a muscle.

Chan, who drew on her experience teaching at NUS, said she had "very engaging classes", especially in tutorials.

"It's really up to the tutor, whether the tutor engages," she said.

Yale-NUS, in particular, said Chan, has the benefit of diversity because it takes in students from all over the world. That in turn helps promote interaction.

Former civil servant Aaron Maniam, who currently teaches at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, cautioned against thinking that the Singaporean public cannot engage in critical thinking:

"I think we are far too disparaging on our public whether they are formally educated or not. We think they cannot engage in critical thinking processes of that kind."

On the contrary, there are "deliberative spaces" in Singapore where Singaporeans do exercise critical thinking, said Maniam.

He gave an example of a discussion group that he facilitated years back on housing policy.

Maniam recounted how a middle-aged participant highlighted her conundrum of wanting the value of her HDB flat to appreciate and, at the same time, wanting property prices to fall so that her son could get a flat.

"She said, 'I don't know how you all do it! If I can't even balance this tension and this trade off for myself — and I'm not even sure what I want — I don't know how you all do it!'

And then we had a good laugh after that, because there's a certain amount of human sympathy in that process, as we realised that governance is hard!"

Coming from another angle, Joanne Yoong, founder of Singapore-based social enterprise Research for Impact, asked if there is an intention to develop these critical thinking capabilities in our educational institutions now that Yale-NUS is closing:

"Was the idea then to seed and further use of those resources to build up those faculties everywhere else, within the broader NUS community? What have we done instead to grow these capacities in other places?"

Plenty for Singaporeans to think about.