

Chan Heng Chee and Cherian George spar over critical thinking in Singapore's universities

At the IPS annual conference, Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee defended Singapore's universities for promoting critical thinking. However, Prof Cherian George argued that students lack the freedom to practice it.

The Online Citizen, 21 January 2025

A debate on the promotion of critical thinking in Singapore unfolded during a panel discussion titled "Community and the State" at the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives conference on 20 January, where Cherian George, Professor of Media Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, clashed with Ambassador-at-Large Chan Heng Chee.

The exchange was triggered by a question from an audience member, who raised concerns about whether Singapore is genuinely fostering critical thinking, especially following the abandonment of the Yale-NUS College initiative.

The question raised was pointed: "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 issue struck a nerve, as the media landscape in Singapore is often seen as stifling controversial discussions, and the [impending closure of Yale-NUS College](#) is widely regarded as a significant setback in the nation's commitment to liberal arts education and fostering critical thought.

Yale-NUS, a liberal arts institution that was established as a partnership between Yale University and the National University of Singapore (NUS), has been instrumental in encouraging critical thinking through a unique, diverse educational environment.

However, the college is set to be merged with the NUS University Scholars Programme, resulting in the end of the Yale-NUS College experience for future students.

The Class of 2025 will be the final cohort to graduate from this prestigious institution.

George Highlights the Lack of Freedom for Critical Thinking Practice in Singapore

In response to the audience's query, Chan Heng Chee, who moderated the discussion, insisted that Singapore's universities already teach critical thinking.

"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."

Despite Chan's assertion, Prof George 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 responded by suggesting that the responsibility for fostering critical thinking lies with the tutors.

“In a lecture hall, I know it is hard to engage, but in tutorials, you do. So I don’t think it is absent,” she said.

She also noted that the diverse student body at Yale-NUS, which includes individuals from all over the world, played a vital role in encouraging dynamic interactions and discussions that are key to the development of critical thinking.

George: Yale-NUS Closure Marks a Shift in Student-led Initiatives

One of the key aspects of the Yale-NUS model, highlighted by George, is the college’s unique student governance system. He pointed out that Yale-NUS students had the autonomy to self-organise without seeking approval from the university’s students’ office.

Instead, they reported directly to the dean, who was more sympathetic to their initiatives.

This autonomy, George argued, allowed students to develop leadership skills and engage in critical thinking outside the traditional academic framework.

However, the closure of Yale-NUS College would mean that its students would now be subject to the more rigid governance structure of NUS, where activities must be cleared by the central NUS administration.

According to George, this shift marks a significant change in the landscape of student-led initiatives in Singapore.

Chan acknowledged that this would be a difference, but emphasised that critical thinking can still be fostered in various other ways.

Maniam Defends the Public’s Ability to Engage in Critical Thinking

Former civil servant Aaron Maniam, who now teaches at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, weighed in with a broader perspective. He cautioned against underestimating the critical thinking abilities of Singapore’s public.

“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.”

Maniam went on to describe “deliberative spaces” in Singapore where critical thinking processes are actively engaged, highlighting a housing policy discussion group he facilitated in the past as an example.

In this group, a middle-aged participant expressed the difficulty she faced in reconciling her desire for her flat’s value to appreciate while hoping for lower property prices to help her son purchase a flat.

Maniam recounted the group’s shared laughter as the participants reflected on the complexities of governance and policy-making, noting that the public, too, can engage in nuanced thinking on such issues.