

Academic freedom issues worried Warwick

Questions ranged from what could be taught to whether protests could be held

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CAN I teach a book that is politically satirical, apply it to the Singapore context and call the Singapore leader a dictator?

That was a question which National University of Singapore (NUS) human-rights expert, Dr Thio Li-ann, had to field when she went to Warwick University last month to address their concerns about academic freedom here.

Her response? She cited student Jamie Han who argued for less government control — and said even the “most enlightened despot” could turn into a “tyrant” if left unchecked — at an NUS dialogue session with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew in February.

“As far as I know, Jamie Han is still alive,” she told about 80 students and lecturers.

Concerns over academic freedom — or the lack of it — have sunk the British university’s plan to set up a branch here, at least for now. There were also worries that it was stretching itself too thin and doubts over whether it could attract top-draw students and staff at its campus here.

After deliberating over an invitation from the Economic Development Board (EDB) for over a year, Warwick’s governing council decided on

Tuesday that it could not proceed in the face of stiff academic opposition. The senate, the supreme academic body, voted 27-13 against the Singapore plan a week ago.

Dr Thio was hired by Warwick in August to write a paper addressing the constraints on freedom of expression here and how this might affect teaching and research activities.

She met Warwick students and lecturers and took questions at a “spirited” 1½ hour forum. One question was whether writer Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, banned here for religious reasons, can be taught.

She said she doubted it, but said the question should be referred to the EDB. Incidentally, Mr Rushdie gave a talk at Warwick this week.

Dr Thio’s bottom line was: “Speech is permissible so long as it does not threaten real political change or to alter the status quo.”

She said: “It is possible

Evidence of liberalisation

“We have seen the boundaries opening up in Singapore and with the push to become a regional hub for finance, transport, arts and education, we believe it will open up further.”

PROF INGLESON of the University of New South Wales, which will open a campus here in 2007

to engage in policy debates, as long as the criticism is issue-specific, directed in rational terms at the substance of a policy, rather than couched as vitriolic attacks against personal reputation.”

Warwick is ranked in the top 10 in Britain for its research excellence. But its culture of student activism and academic freedom made having a Singapore campus tricky.

Its students, for example, expressed concern as to what would happen if they held protests here. They also wondered if Warwick Pride — a society for gays and lesbians — could be set up here.

When contacted yesterday, however, EDB’s director of services cluster Kenneth Tan maintained that “there is scope for healthy and rigorous academic discussions and debates in a classroom setting that are objective and accurately grounded”.

Like Warwick, the University of New South Wales also had similar concerns when it considered setting up here. But the Australian institution overcame them and will open in Singapore in 2007.

Its deputy vice-chancellor, Professor John Ingleson, said research collaborations with Singapore academics helped them gain a “sophisticated” understanding of the social and political environment of Singapore.

He added: “We have seen the boundaries opening up in Singapore and... we believe it will open up further.”

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