Wary Warwick won’t open campus in S’pore

Request for exemption from S’pore laws unrealistic: NUS don

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UNCERTAINTY over academic freedom was instrumental in a top British university choosing to back out of setting up a campus in Singapore.

The University of Warwick’s decision was labelled a “disappointing” one, said Dr Thio Li-ann, a human rights expert from the National University of Singapore’s law faculty.

Dr Thio, invited by Warwick last month to meet its staff and faculty, said that while their concerns were “understandable”, it was unrealistic to expect Singapore to change its laws and values for them, or anyone else for that matter.

Warwick was set to become the second full-fledged foreign university in Singapore, following in the footsteps of Australia’s University of New South Wales, which will open its campus here in two years’ time.

Recently ranked fifth in Britain by the Times newspaper, Warwick was one of several foreign universities invited by the Economic Development Board (EDB) under its Global Schoolhouse plan.

On Tuesday, Warwick’s university council voted against the new campus, just days after its senior lecturers had voted 27-13 against the plan.

Questions were also raised over the financial viability of the campus, estimated to cost almost £300 million ($892 million).

The council, however, said in a statement posted on the university’s website that it would continue discussions within the academic community and with the EDB to study an “alternative plan” in Singapore.

Nearly a quarter of Warwick’s 15,500 students are from overseas, including almost 10 from Singapore.

Said Dr Thio in an interview with TODAY: “While the economic concerns were real, that doesn’t tend to move people. Instead, it’s the human rights issues.

‘Firstly, you’ve got to understand their culture. They have a strong Human Rights Act.

“They were thinking, ‘If we go to Singapore, will this same mentality be allowed?’”

During her two-day visit to Warwick, she saw the students were “very organised” and had a “powerful student union” with a history of demonstrations.

“They asked me what was the law here. I explained to them that if you want to hold a protest, you have to apply for a permit by the police. Law and order is defined differently here and there’s a lot more sensitivity towards public order in Singapore.”

A few weeks ago, Warwick wrote to the EDB to ask that its students in Singapore be exempt from laws that would limit freedom of speech, press and assembly, as well as that bans on areas such as homosexuality be removed.

Dr Thio, however, said: “It raises the issue whether the Government has to come up with a different approach for foreigners.

“For example, you cannot smoke marijuana here. Why should we change our drug laws for you? We have certain values, why should we change our values for you? There must be some give-and-take.”

The EDB, meanwhile, has maintained that it will not continue to try to bring Warwick to Singapore as its partner for a second comprehensive university.