



# OBSTACLES TO LIBERAL EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY ON SINGAPORE'S YALE-NUS COLLEGE

*Arkar Kyaw, MA 2024*

## Introduction

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Yale-NUS College (“Yale-NUS”) was Singapore’s first full residential liberal arts college made by a partnership between Yale University (“Yale”) and National University of Singapore (“NUS”). It officially welcomed its first cohort in 2013 and introduced a core curriculum that teaches Western and Asian core texts through discussion-focused seminar-style classes to Singapore. On 27 August 2021, only after a decade of operation, NUS announced that Yale-NUS will be merged with NUS’s University Scholars Program to form a new college within NUS thereby ending the partnership with Yale.

The decision to close Yale-NUS was controversial because it was made abruptly and without consultation with key stakeholders, including students, faculty, and Yale University leadership itself (Sharma, 2021). Many within the Yale–NUS community expressed shock and disappointment at the lack of transparency. It was discussed in the Parliament of Singapore on 13 Sep 2021 with several MPs calling the event into question. As per the official rationale given by NUS and the Ministry of Education, it was a strategic decision in order to expand access to affordable, interdisciplinary liberal arts education across the broader NUS student body and Singaporeans at large (Chye, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2021). However, many still questioned the decision saying it did not justify the abrupt and unilateral nature of the decision. Some also pointed out that these goals are achievable without dissolving Yale-NUS which was already a successful model of liberal education in Asia at the time (Lim and Fong, 2021).

Many academics, journalists, and educators interested in liberal education have tried to analyze, uncover, and speculate the deeper reasons behind the decision to close down Yale-NUS. However, these accounts operated only within the context of institutional, administrative, and political circumstances in Singapore and did not extrapolate larger implications for liberal education in general. As interest in liberal education grows, particularly in Asia (Godwin, 2013, 2015; Godwin & Altbach, 2016), it is important to consider the implications of Yale-NUS’s closure on how liberal education is understood, perceived, and received by the public at large



and more importantly by the policymakers. For this reason, the study aims to connect the story of Yale-NUS with the purpose and nature of liberal education from a higher perspective by connecting the specific issues, events, and controversies Yale-NUS had faced with the theoretical, philosophical underpinnings of liberal education.

The study involved a review of relevant literature on philosophical accounts of liberal education, gathering facts on the issues, events, and controversies surrounding Yale-NUS College, and analyzing these issues thematically against the backdrop of the philosophical accounts of liberal education. In order to cover the subjective experiences, interviews were conducted during April, May, and June 2025 with alumni, faculty members, and administrative staffs connected with Yale-NUS as well as few other residents of Singapore who are not directly connected, Singaporean educators, and parents of the alumni of Yale-NUS. After collecting facts and stories surrounding the controversy of Yale-NUS's closure, they are analysed into common themes and their relationship to the larger issues of liberal education. From the analysis, key obstacles to liberal education are identified, as reflected in the case study of Yale-NUS College. Finally, several strategies are suggested in light of the obstacles discussed.

## Challenges to Liberal Education

Criticism and controversies against Yale-NUS can be categorized into three ideological camps: (1) neoliberalism; (2) populism, and (3) freedom of speech. Each of these concerns regarding the College reflects the larger issues, criticisms or misunderstandings on liberal education. Situating the criticism that Yale-NUS faced within the larger purpose and nature of liberal education reveals that challenges to liberal education come from major ideologies that dominate the education discourse today.

### *Neoliberalism*

Financial sustainability of Yale-NUS was one of the major discussion points behind the decision of the merger (The Economist, 2021). Then Education Minister Sing framed the restructuring as a move to achieve economies of scale, allowing a broader student population to benefit from liberal arts pedagogy without the high per-capita costs associated with Yale-NUS's model (Ministry of Education, 2021). While financial concern may not be the primary concern behind the closure (*see* Lewis, 2024; Lim and Fong, 2021), it is still important to point out that cost-effectiveness is one of the challenges for a small liberal arts college model. In so far as Yale-NUS is committed to fulfilling its founding goals of delivering liberal education, it



is necessary to keep the classroom sizes small and keep the faculty-student ratio low, thereby raising operating costs. The residential living aspect also adds to the financial burden.

This created a trade-off between cost effectiveness and education ideals behind liberal education. The ideal learning situation for liberal education includes a continuous contact between a student and the teacher (Klein, 1960) as the pedagogy involves dialectical questioning in Socratic mode. Therefore, liberal education necessarily requires a small intimate community but institutionalizing of small intimate community within the higher education system demands substantial resources. Such a high demand for institutional resources is an obstacle for policymakers and advocates of liberal education to convince the stakeholders about investing in liberal education under the question of cost effectiveness. Cost effectiveness of Yale-NUS being one of the considerations behind the decision for closure is an evidence.

### ***Populism***

Another related concern is the status of Yale-NUS as an elite institution within Singapore. Several interviewees noted that Yale-NUS is generally seen in Singapore as an elite institution, designed to train the elite class. This perception was fuelled by highly selective admission (around 5%), high tuition and operational costs (Ministry of Education, 2021), as well as the career trajectories of its graduates. One interviewee went so far to speculate that the charge of elitism is one of the primary motives for closure of Yale-NUS. It was also noted by some interviewees that the decision for the closure coincided with the regular election cycle in 2020 when the ruling People's Action Party grew more sensitive to demands about limiting work permits to foreigner workers and other nationalist-populist sentiments.

On the other hand, liberal education does have aristocratic visions. Leo Strauss discusses this aspect of liberal education succinctly in his seminal essay *What is Liberal Education?* (1968). Strauss points out that democracy often turns out to be a mass culture with a tendency to produce nothing but “specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart.” Against the backdrop of this mass culture, liberal education is the counterpoison necessary to educate the democratic mass society by exposing the members to human greatness. Charges of elitism towards liberal arts colleges have this basis in liberal education's original goal of elevating the mass democracy into democracy as intended. An inherent difficulty of liberal education is that it is both inclusive and exclusive at the same time.

Liberal arts colleges have attempted to respond to the charges of elitism and exclusivity by means of generous and need-blind scholarships. Yale-NUS's “need-blind” admission policy



and generous scholarships made education more accessible than often assumed (Bloom, 2021) but this also leads to the previously discussed issue of cost-effectiveness. Thus, liberal education faces another trade-off between financial efficiency and mass accessibility. This obstacle appeared in the closure of Yale-NUS as an attempt to “make interdisciplinary education more accessible, at a greater scale” (Chye, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2021). Ultimately, government’s emphasis on scalability and mass accessibility, fuelled by rising populist and nationalistic sentiments at the time, as Lewis (2024) suggested, overshadowed Yale-NUS’s ability to sustain itself as a small, elite institution devoted to liberal education. Thus, policymakers and advocates of liberal education must be aware and balance the aristocratic aspect of liberal education with populist demands of public education.

### *Freedom of Speech*

In the prospectus for Yale-NUS college, Richard Levin (then President of Yale University) and Peter Salovey (then provost) identified "Academic Freedom" as one of the issues for special focus alongside funding, Yale leadership, and non-discrimination of employment, admissions, and education opportunities. In fact, the discussion on academic freedom is longest among the four issues. The key question is whether liberal education is possible under a regime with broad defamation laws and prohibition against public demonstrations which limit the freedom of expression. They also noted that there are few who are concerned about having programs in places with much more constraining laws on speech. The solution reached between Yale, NUS, and the Ministry of Education is to include a clause in the Final Agreement to ensure academic freedom but qualified by "the need to act in accordance with the accepted scholarly and professional standards and the regulations" and encouraged the teachers and students to be sensitive to the political, cultural differences, citing the similar partnerships in China and Saudi Arabia.

Yale-NUS managed to keep its promise of academic freedom on campus throughout its lifetime, and only a handful of events on campus emerged as a concern (Wong, 2018; Chua, 2017; The Strait Times, 2019). Student activities and events on campus created a negative public discourse among Singaporeans who were not intimately connected to the college community. For outsiders, it appeared that Yale-NUS was exposing and “indoctrinating” the promising future leaders of Singapore to “western”, “liberal” ideas and practices (Wong, 2018). Many interviewees likewise noted that people in Singapore generally think of Yale-NUS as a “bastion of western liberal thought” and Yale-NUS was considered “very liberal” or



“progressive” by many. The alumni also displayed a frustration of people confusing liberal arts with political “liberal” ideology. Many Yale-NUS College community members pointed to student activism on campus as the major reason for the closure.

Controversy over Yale-NUS student’s alleged “activism” and mode of conduct highlights a deeper fundamental misunderstanding of the transcendental goals of liberal education. This also reflects the fundamental tension that exists between the city (*polis*) as a political community and the philosophic way of life represented by liberal education. The state demands allegiance to certain accepted beliefs, customs, and lifestyle via public education while liberal education encourages students to question, explore, and experiment with the accepted notions (Klein, 1960; Strauss, 1968). This often results in misidentification of liberal education as a political project, indoctrination, being “western”, “colonial”, or “liberal.” On this point, we are reminded of a certain Athenian philosopher Socrates, who was put on trial for the charges of impiety and corruption of the youth as well as Plato’s timeless work *the Apology of Socrates*, in which Plato beautifully represents Socrates’ noble defence while highlighting to the fundamental tension between the city and the philosopher. The misidentification of liberal education as a political ideology is another obstacle that policymakers and advocates of liberal education must confront.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

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These obstacles to liberal education exist not only within Yale-NUS and Singapore context but they are also applicable to any institution that attempts to deliver liberal education because they are related to the goals and nature of liberal education itself. As these obstacles exist as a tension between liberal education and policy goals of the state (*polis*), these obstacles cannot be easily removed, but only managed.

In light of these obstacles for liberal education, few strategies are suggested to policymakers and advocates of liberal education, particularly for those in developing countries and in Southeast Asia. The recommendations include considering programs smaller than liberal arts college, leveraging international partnerships and private sector, emphasizing its educational values over cost-effectiveness, emphasizing scholarship opportunities and inclusivity, integrating with other non-liberal arts programs, focusing on the classics in the curriculum, and careful messaging about liberal education with awareness of partisan politics.



## *Liberal education and financial sustainability*

Following strategies may be useful for policymakers and advocates of liberal education with regards to financial sustainability:

1. **Consider programs smaller than liberal arts colleges.** This is especially relevant for developing countries such as Myanmar. While it is true that liberal education is typically associated with higher education, it is not limited to it. The essence and goals of liberal education can be achieved on a scale smaller than a full-fledged college, whether at pre-college level, high school level, or even as part of professional training.
2. **Leverage international partnerships and private sector.** One of the points of consideration for the decision for Yale-NUS's closure –although not primary—was that the financial burden of funding the College by public funds of Singapore. However, there is a growing trend and interest in internationalization of liberal education around the world – especially in Asia (Godwin, 2013, 2015; and Godwin and Altbach, 2016). Small liberal arts college model has been shown to have positive effects on intercultural learning, lifelong learning, well-being, and leadership (Seifert et al., 2007) which are competencies desired by the private sector. Policymakers and advocates of liberal education may leverage this opportunity to structure strategic partnerships while minimizing the financial burden.
3. **Emphasize educational values rather than cost-effectiveness.** One of the most influential criteria for decision-making is cost-effectiveness, and it is a major obstacle for policymakers and advocates of liberal education to overcome. However, as education is the one of the most important areas of human life, a higher standard of evaluation should be preferred to include the “intangible” benefits of liberal education. Therefore, advocates of liberal education should emphasize its inherent educational values as an important decision criterion outside of neoliberal, technocratic framework.

## *Liberal education and the ivory tower*

Following strategies may be adopted by policymakers and advocates of liberal education to combat the charges of elitism and populist demands in education:

1. **Emphasize the scholarship opportunities.** One painful misunderstanding of Yale-NUS is that it is prohibitively expensive. While it is true that the sticker prices are higher than average university in Singapore, the need-blind admission policy and generosity



of financial aid is largely overlooked. Taking scholarships into account, the average financial burden on a student attending Yale-NUS may be even lower than that of a typical NUS student (Bloom, 2021). This missed opportunity in messaging is typical for all liberal arts colleges, misleading the public to think that liberal education is inaccessible. Policymakers and advocates of liberal education should be aware of this and highlight equality of opportunity while downplaying the exclusive nature of liberal education.

2. **Better integration of liberal education.** To its credit, this is the approach that NUS took to respond to the populist criticisms of Yale-NUS as an exclusive community (the nickname for Yale-NUS on NUS campus is “the castle”). By creating the NUS College, Yale-NUS’s pedagogy and facilities are integrated into the larger NUS ecosystem. While this approach compromises the purity and focus of liberal education (for instance, the new NUS College’s website makes no mention of commitment to “liberal education”), we acknowledge that this may be more viable in other countries and circumstances.

### ***Liberal education and partisan politics***

Policymakers and advocates of liberal education may navigate political concerns related to liberal education with the following strategies:

1. **Focus on the classics.** One notable pedagogical innovation of Yale-NUS is the Core Curriculum which introduces the student to timeless classics of both the West and the East. The readings included *The Odyssey*, *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Tale of Genji*, and *Frankenstein*, and students engaged with thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Mencius, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Al-Farabi. The combination of Western and Eastern classics is in anticipation to criticisms of the curriculum being “western-focused” and it is well celebrated by students and educators alike. The advantage of focusing on classics is that it moves away from contemporary partisan discussions while keeping the focus on important foundational ideas. While this is not the complete solution to partisan accusations, this allows the students to approach contemporary issues from a perspective higher than partisan sentiments.
2. **Non-partisan messaging.** Liberal education has unfortunate name of being associated with partisan “liberal” politics which makes it difficult to articulate its nonpartisan nature. To overcome this obstacle, some have chosen to use other similar words such



as holistic education, critical thinking, emancipatory education, or general education. While these words do not capture the meaning and intent of liberal education, they are nonetheless useful tools for public discourse.

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