

Don't wave placards, offer solutions instead

ENCOURAGING undergraduates to be engaged in society raises the question of whether a line should be drawn between developing a social conscience and engaging in political activism.

One who draws such a line on campus is Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT) president Tan Thiam Soon.

He sees the role of his university as training "thinking tinkers", who connect what they learn in class to the needs of the community – and contribute in practical ways.

He says: "If they want to champion activism totally unrelated to what they study, we will probably tell (them), 'Very interesting, very good, but do it outside your curriculum'."

National University of Singapore political science lecturer Reuben Wong points to the backdrop of the University of Singapore as a hotbed of activism in the 1960s and 1970s.

Then, students clashed with the Government over restrictions that it said were needed to guard against communist influences.

Today's university leaders emphasise that students need to obey the law of the land – such as unlawful assembly – and avoid polarising the campus.

Better still, provide a feasible solution to the problem instead of waving placards.

There is also less of a need to take to the streets, notes Associate Professor Wong, as young people have many ways to engage the Government and civil society, from social media to the Speakers' Corner. "It's not like the Arab Spring where people have so few channels they go to the streets," he says.

NUS vice-provost for student life Tan Tai Yong recalls that some years ago, students wanted to hold a protest against the shooting of monks in Myanmar. The school authorities asked them to move it indoors. A vigil was carried out peacefully.

Professor Tan reiterates that activism should be in line with the laws of the land, be purposeful and well thought-out.

"There will be people who say, 'I want change', but what is it you want to change and how do you do it in a reasoned and intelligent way, and also respectful of differences?" he says.

Another take comes from Nanyang Technological University provost Freddy Boey: "The university cannot be different from the society it is in and which owns the university. Activism of a nature

that is confrontational is foreign to Singapore."

He adds: "If students are not breaking the law, just heightening consciousness and can be tolerant, I will say, 'Why not?'"

"But if it becomes a big issue for another group of people, we will have to explain to them to exercise caution, and this is the Singapore way."

Other universities point to their mission to promote rational discourse or equip people to better serve their society.

Singapore Management University president Arnoud De Meyer says the university should be a neutral place where people listen to one another and engage with those with different opinions, but not be "an engine of activism".

They should present arguments "based on empirical evidence, not on a political, ideological basis".

And SIT's Professor Tan notes: "Many of (those) who make impactful contributions to society are not the ones that philosophise about (their) great social mission. They see a need, and just go out week after week doing a simple thing, but improving lives. Those are the real heroes we want our students to emulate."

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