

3

THE STATE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN SINGAPORE'S WORLD-BEATING UNIVERSITIES

**Cherian George, Chong Ja Ian,
and Shannon Ang**

Singapore's universities are among the world's best according to global rankings such as those from QS and *Times Higher Education*. Their outstanding performance has been driven by a political leadership that treats world-class universities as integral to the country's global competitiveness.¹ Since the 1990s, government policies have pushed universities to ramp up research to help drive the development of a knowledge economy.² Taking advantage of Singapore's position as an English-speaking Asian hub city with a high standard of living, the state has also turned universities into magnets for regional talent. Substantial public investments, the aggressive internationalization of faculty and students, and the incentivizing of research productivity continue to contribute to the sector's rise.

These strong fundamentals conceal the country's shortcomings with regard to academic freedom. The global Academic Freedom Index (AFI) rates Singapore closer to the one-party regimes of Vietnam and China than to liberal Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan.³ Yet there has been no indication, publicly at least, that university or government officials are greatly bothered by such assessments. They face little pressure from within academia in Singapore to rectify the situation. This chapter tries not only to probe various dimensions of academic freedom

in the republic but also to explain the system's resilience. The literature on this topic is extremely limited. This analysis is based on the authors' own knowledge of the system and a 2021 survey of Singapore-based academics published by the AcademiaSG collective.⁴

Universities are, in the words of UNESCO, “communities of scholars . . . pursuing new knowledge without constriction by prescribed doctrines,” and teaching “without fear of repression by the state or any other source.”⁵ In post-Enlightenment eyes, there is something fundamentally contradictory about universities claiming to aspire to excellence while failing to protect the space for fearless and free inquiry. We share this view. But we do not assume that such contradictions are necessarily unsustainable or that there is a teleological imperative driving the higher education sector toward higher levels of academic freedom.

Instead, our analysis is informed by insights from comparative politics and critical studies, which observe that consolidated authoritarian regimes can comfortably coexist with—and indeed draw sustenance from—capitalist globalization. In what some have described as “authoritarian neoliberalism,” contemporary capitalism is associated with forms of government that “marginalize, discipline, and control dissenting social groups and oppositional politics rather than strive for their explicit consent or co-optation.”⁶ Such forms of authoritarian control can coexist with elections in so-called “electoral authoritarian” or “competitive authoritarian” systems.⁷ From such a perspective, the higher education industry's combination of world-class achievement and political censorship and control is unexceptional.

The state of Singapore's academy is, in many ways, a microcosm of the larger political environment. The same paradoxical combination of authoritarian controls and global competitiveness has been observed in the broader political economy of Singapore,⁸ the media industry,⁹ digital technology,¹⁰ and the arts.¹¹ As with other sectors, the state has been able to ride the global neoliberal tide, instrumentalizing higher education while constricting its emancipatory potential.

This article highlights three ways Singapore squares the circle, enabling its universities to excel according to globally recognized metrics even as it constrains the public role of academics. First, there are obstacles placed in the way of politically sensitive research and teaching. Second, the state operates an opaque system of political vetting to control access to employment and career progression within the higher education sector. Third, the political system circumscribes the role that universities play as spaces for public discourse. These multidimensional manipulations are selective and highly targeted, inhibiting some scholars some of the time while allowing the majority of academics and students to enjoy

resources and opportunities comparable to the best (and freest) universities in the world. The prevailing structure of incentives and disincentives has nudged individuals and institutions away from public scholarship. It has also hollowed out Singapore's universities, such that many internationally competitive departments lack commensurate capacity in the critical study of their own country. We draw on findings from the AcademiaSG survey to capture this variegated picture.¹²

The AcademiaSG study suggests that Singapore's robust system of restraints on academic freedom has resulted in faculty being asked to modify or suppress their findings, and to seek permission from supervisors when engaging with civil society or the media. But observations of, or personal experience with, direct intervention by the state or state agencies are not common. Rather, academics in Singapore say that the enforcement of restrictions tends to come in the form of administrative decisions, admonishments, and counseling, which many suspect originate from higher authorities. Signals also come from peers and even students, contributing to a culture of self-censorship. Limits on access to data likewise curtail the ability to conduct research in some areas, even if academics generally feel free to teach and conduct research. Taken together, the environment for academics working in Singapore is one where perceptions of monitoring and punishment are strong and pervasive, particularly in the social sciences and humanities.

These controls are largely internalized within academic institutions: A high proportion of the survey respondents who report less-than-free working conditions say that their assessment is based on what supervisors have told them or on explicit rules set by their institutions. It is noteworthy that no Singaporean university is among the more than 900 signatories of the Magna Charta Universitatum, a statement of fundamental values, including academic freedom and institutional autonomy, that has even been endorsed by a handful of universities in China.¹³ Singapore's institutional indifference to these values contrasts with individual academics' stated beliefs. An overwhelming majority of survey respondents said they agreed with academic freedom principles articulated in the Magna Charta.

Our perspective on threats to academic freedom is aligned with critical censorship studies, which tell us that direct and coercive external interventions are only one—and often not the most debilitating—type of obstacle to free and open inquiry and discourse. Indirect, internalized, and less visible methods can cultivate a culture of self-censorship that reduces the need for and costs of coercion. Structural conditions also play a large role. How states and markets incentivize some communicative activities over others can have a profound effect on the allocation of resources in media and culture. The distribution of opportunities is not random but reflects inequalities of political and economic power. Academia is no different. A key goal of this paper is to understand how these processes and mechanisms operate in Singapore as a first step to thinking

about how academia in the country can better engage in knowledge production and enter into conversation with society.

The Political and Historical Context

Singapore has been called, among other terms, an electoral autocracy and an illiberal democracy, which reflects its hybrid quality.¹⁴ It conducts elections that, while not completely fair, have been free enough to attract the enthusiastic participation of opposition parties and confer legitimacy to winners. Since acquiring self-rule from the British in 1959 (it became an independent republic in 1965), Singapore has known only one governing entity, the People's Action Party (PAP). The PAP inherited sweeping discretionary powers from Singapore's former colonial masters, including security laws that allow the government to arrest suspects without warrant and detain them without trial, and to ban books and other publications deemed seditious or undesirable.

The authorities used such powers to decimate dissent from the 1960s to the 1980s. They targeted every sector harboring democratic tendencies—labor unions, civil society, cultural groups, the press, the legal profession, and religious movements. Schools and universities were brought to heel early on. Student activists were among the more than one hundred individuals rounded up in Operation Coldstore in 1963.¹⁵ Ostensibly directed at communist subversion, the mass arrests also served as the PAP's coup de grâce in its fight for survival against a large breakaway party, Barisan Sosialis. In a mopping-up operation involving more than 1,000 police officers the following year, fifty-two students were arrested at Nanyang University, a Barisan stronghold.¹⁶ In 1975, the president of the University of Singapore Student Union (USSU), Tan Wah Piow, was convicted for his alleged involvement in a labor dispute that turned unruly.¹⁷ Tan had been championing social justice causes during his stint as a student leader. Five of his fellow student leaders were detained and deported.

The government did not routinize overt repression, however. Nor did it opt for the full-scale nationalization of institutions in the tradition of communist states. Instead, once it coercively neutralized a troublesome sector, the government usually allowed it to revive within a more regulated framework that enabled officials to engage in behind-the-scenes supervision and structural interventions.¹⁸ The authorities, in partnership with trusted institutional leaders, were thus able to nip political challenges in the bud. This rendered spectacular post-hoc punishments, such as arrests and bans, largely redundant.

The architect of what has been called Singapore's "developmental state," its influential first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, insisted that the PAP set the direction for most aspects of the young republic's life. He explained that freedoms "must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and

to the primacy of purpose of an elected government.”¹⁹ He was referring in that speech to media freedom, but the same principle applies equally to other domains: citizens and nonstate organizations can enjoy various freedoms only to the extent that these do not interfere with the government’s exercise of its responsibilities. In stark contrast to liberal democratic and human rights norms, the PAP’s philosophy considers governmental expediency as legitimate, public-interest grounds for restricting civil and political liberties. The executive branch’s domination over the rest of society is effected through legislation and governance systems that allow for the political oversight of and intervention in key institutions.

The principle of executive prerogatives has been a feature of university governance since the late colonial period. Singapore did not go the way of Britain, India, or Hong Kong by setting up an independent university grants committee (UGC) to mediate between universities and the state or balance the interests of academic freedom with public accountability. A 1957 commission recommended the creation of a Malayan UGC, which would disburse public funds to Singapore’s two universities. The idea was rejected by the governments of Malaya and Singapore.²⁰ The University of Singapore’s first vice-chancellor, B. R. Sreenivasan, tried to revive the idea of a UGC in 1963 when he realized that his requests for funding were contingent on whether he was “prepared to be directed by [the] Government in the admission of students and in the appointment of academic staff.”²¹ Making no headway, he resigned shortly after.

The state’s handling of campus activism has evolved in line with the PAP’s preference for permanent institutional fixes over reactive crackdowns. After using arrests and expulsions to crush student protests during the republic’s first decade, the government transitioned to more structural interventions. One early move to put a permanent end to alleged communist infiltration was a 1964 amendment to national security legislation that required all students seeking a place in institutions of higher learning to obtain a government-issued “certificate of suitability.” In 1965 and 1966, a total of 232 applications for these security clearances were rejected. The system was suspended in 1978. “This should remove any inhibition against healthy, constructive and open discussions among students of economic, social and political issues and Singapore’s future,” the Ministry of Home Affairs said when announcing the policy change.²² In the interim, however, the government had imposed more far-reaching inhibitors. Following the USSU affair in 1975, the government amended university constitutions, putting a lid on student politics.

The government also overhauled Nanyang University, which had been established by the ethnic Chinese community in 1958 as the first university outside of China that catered to students from Chinese-medium schools. Its independent spirit and leftist streak remained a thorn in the flesh of the PAP. It was also out of step with the PAP’s emphasis on English as Singapore’s working language. Citing

falling enrollments and standards, the government closed Nanyang University in 1980, merging it with the University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore (NUS). At NUS, the government prohibited academic staff unions, which had served as important autonomous voices for faculty at its two predecessors.²³ As demand for tertiary education grew, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) was established in 1991 on the old Nanyang University campus. NUS and NTU remain the main publicly funded universities. Since their corporatization in 2006, NUS and NTU have operated as not-for-profit entities, primarily funded by the state and accountable to the education ministry through five-year policy and performance agreements. Singapore Management University (SMU) had followed this model from its founding in 2000. In official nomenclature, they are termed “autonomous universities” (AUs). The other three AUs are the Singapore University of Technology and Design, the Singapore University of Social Sciences, and the Singapore Institute of Technology. Several foreign universities also operate Singapore campuses that focus largely on professional degrees and continuing education, and that serve a smaller number of undergraduates.²⁴

At odds with the drive to grant more autonomy to public bodies is the PAP’s institutional memory of the alleged united front strategy used by the communists to infiltrate a wide range of innocuous social and cultural organizations. Long after communist insurgency ceased to be a threat in Singapore, the government remained suspicious of critics who tried to “set the political agenda from outside the political arena” by commenting regularly on politics.²⁵ A recent government statement on academic freedom was in line with this decades-old principle. The then-minister for education told Parliament in 2019 that the ministry and local universities valued academic freedom. “Our AUs have always been places where different ideas are explored and debated, and public discourse carried out vigorously and also rigorously,” he said. “However . . . our educational institutions should not be misused as a platform for partisan politics. . . . Academic freedom cannot be *carte blanche* for anyone to misuse an academic institution for political advocacy, for this would undermine the institution’s academic standards and public standing.” The minister’s statements provoked concerns about how the governmental and institutional gatekeepers interpreted subjective red lines such as advocacy and partisanship.²⁶

Had the government’s handling of politically unruly campuses been entirely destructive, however, Singapore’s universities would not have become the world leaders they are today. Even as it slammed some doors shut, it opened others. As with other sectors, its strategy was to channel professional and institutional energies away from democratic politics and toward economic development. In this respect, Singapore was hardly an aberration but very much in sync with the global neoliberal revolution. The increasingly marketized higher education

industries of free societies have similarly prioritized their economic contribution over their political potential.²⁷ Similarly, just like the neoliberal wave, the PAP's notion of globalization emphasizes economic interconnectivity at the expense of moral and cultural solidarities. This harmonization with neoliberalism explains why the forcible depoliticization of certain sectors—not just universities but also culture industries and the legal profession, for example—was indeed followed by economic flourishing. This in turn helps explain why the subordination of various institutions has been sustained with minimal resistance. Material rewards are plentiful for those who reconcile themselves with the PAP's leading role. Co-optation, conformism, and self-censorship—not repression—are the day-to-day modalities of power in Singapore. Global rankings considering such factors as publication counts, citations, the internationalization of students and faculty, and endowment size systematically overlook issues of academic freedom and political control, much less self-censorship.

The 2020 AFI study placed Singapore in its “C Status” band—along with such states as Angola, Chad, Hungary, India, Malaysia, and Pakistan—indicating significant but not severe constraints on academic activity.²⁸ The AcademiaSG survey sought a more fine-grained picture of the limits on academics' autonomy, particularly in terms of how academics experienced such restrictions. It also tried to get a better handle on the phenomenon of self-censorship—whether, for example, this is the result of academics second-guessing in an uncertain environment, or an explicit signal from their supervisors and institutions. Here, we examine three dimensions of censorship and control: restrictions on academics' research and teaching; controlling access to employment in institutions of higher learning; and circumscribing universities' democratic role as part of the public sphere.

Censorship of Research and Teaching

In the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) questionnaire that AFI draws from, expert coders are asked to assess, among other factors, the country's freedom to research and teach. The AcademiaSG survey posed the same question to its respondents. Both the V-Dem rating and the AcademiaSG survey mean converged near a score of “2”—“Moderately restricted. When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are occasionally subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.”

Summarizing the freedom to research and teach in a single score does not account for the targeted quality of restrictions. For example, while 84.3 percent of respondents to the AcademiaSG survey report being free to engage in their broad research agenda (table 4.1), that number drops to 76 percent among those who consider their research areas to be politically sensitive (figure 3.1). A lower proportion, 65.6 percent, feel free to talk about controversial or sensitive issues

in class. It is not clear why more faculty feel inhibited in the classroom than in their research. It could be because universities regulate teaching more tightly than research. Another possible reason is pushback by “conservative students,” which one respondent highlighted as an understudied challenge to academic freedom.

Do you feel free to...	Yes (%)	No (%)	No. of Valid responses
choose your preferred research area and broad agenda?	84.3	15.7	191
to pursue specific research projects?	83.6	16.4	189
shape your syllabi and reading lists as you wish?	85.9	14.1	191
talk about issues that may be sensitive or controversial (in class)?	65.6	34.4	189

Table 3.1. Survey results on freedom to conduct academic activities.

Have you felt free to choose your preferred research area and broad agenda?

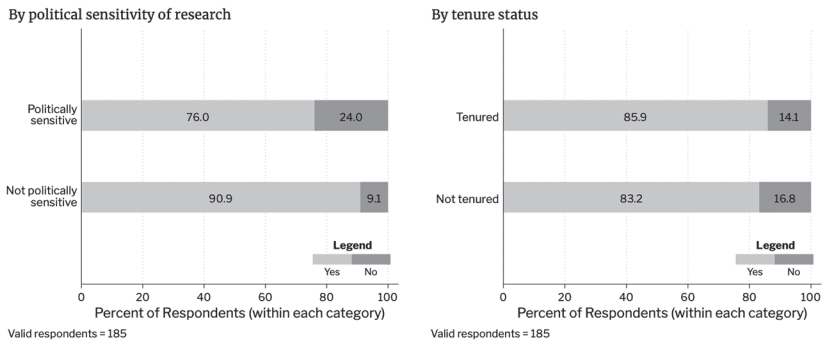


Figure 3.1. Proportion reporting freedom to pursue broad research agenda, by political sensitivity of research and tenure status.

Predictably, the red lines are associated with politics. One-third (33.7 percent) of respondents reported having been told (or that others they know had been told) to modify or withdraw their research findings for administrative reasons (figure 3.2). Most of these respondents (88.7 percent) were not convinced by the stated administrative reason, with most (91.5 percent) attributing the intervention to political or ideological sensitivity. More than half of these unconvinced respondents also believed the decision was made at the level of university management (60 percent) and/or the Ministry of Education (MOE) or beyond (53.3 percent).

Have you or scholars who you know ever been told to modify the content of research findings or withdraw their research findings for administrative reasons?

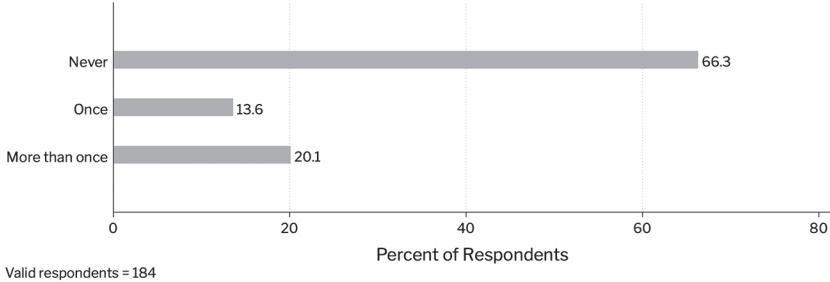


Figure 3.2. Experience of administrative intervention in research.

In answer to a question borrowed from V-Dem, almost three-quarters (74 percent) of the AcademiaSG survey's respondents said that while there is some academic freedom, strong or direct criticism of the government is sometimes or mostly met with repression. As one respondent put it, "There is academic freedom as long as you toe the party line so to speak. As long as you do not engage in topics, issues deemed sensitive, then you are fine. If your research findings paint the state in a not too positive light, you will be dissuaded by the govt funding agency to publish your data." Another pointed out that the selective application of constraints meant that "certain scholars care more about the issue of censorship/repression than others," adding that this results in the lack of a "united voice," a problem compounded by the absence of unions representing academics. Even within the area of politics, many scholars have specializations—from political philosophy to international relations—that do not require them to go close to the government's red lines. At the National University of Singapore's political science department, for example, fewer than one-third of tenure-track faculty write about Singapore.²⁹

Complaints about censorship are sometimes brushed aside with declarations like "nobody has stopped me from doing my research," which may be factual yet misleading—such statements do not address, for example, whether the academic's choice of research area was entirely free. Some areas of research are also clearly less politically sensitive and very unlikely to face censorship. Furthermore, research is a multistage process that involves selecting broad research areas and specific research questions; gathering collaborators; acquiring funds and time; obtaining ethics committee approval; accessing data and other evidence; writing; and publication and dissemination. Each link in this chain is vulnerable to pressures that can skew research and teaching to serve the interests of people in power.

The integrity of academic work in Singapore is compromised by multiple weak links. One likely obstacle to local research is the difficulty in accessing official data. Most do without it: 84.9 percent of respondents reported doing none or only a minority of their research with government-controlled data or sites (figure 3.3). Notably, *none* of these respondents cited “the nature of the research topic does not require such data/access” as a reason for this. Instead, 69.5 percent of these respondents reported that stipulated conditions for data access were too restrictive or onerous, and 27.3 percent chose to avoid research topics that could entail complications in access, approval, or publication (respondents could indicate more than one reason).

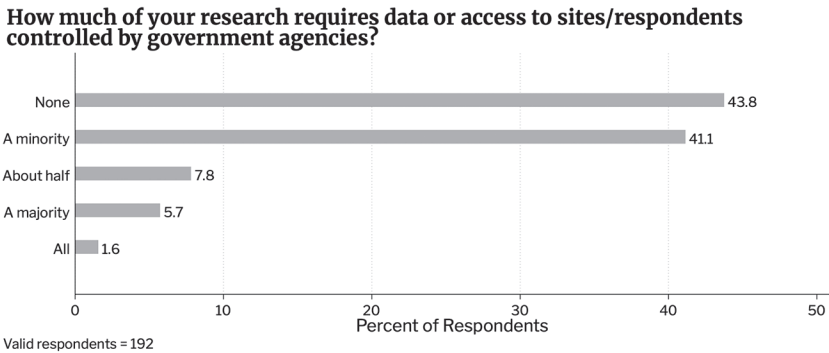


Figure 3.3. Proportion of research requiring government-controlled data or access.

Some possibly problematic links in the research supply chain were not covered by the AcademiaSG survey. In at least one university, the standard process of research ethics clearance can trigger a separate procedure for assessing “institutional risk.” Proposed research on “sensitive” topics, such as projects that could hurt the university’s reputation, may be escalated to the university’s management. This practice, which was highlighted by one of the survey respondents, expands the peer-driven institutional review process for protecting vulnerable human participants to include a potential avenue for censorship by university management. It may also serve to protect the researcher in a context where political missteps may be career-limiting through no fault of the institution (see next section).

National research funding agencies, meanwhile, do not appear to have set up formal arrangements to insulate funding decisions from political considerations. The Social Science Research Council has been chaired since its inception by a nonacademic: a retired senior civil servant, Peter Ho. Its deputy head is a person

with an academic background who became a full-time diplomat in the late 1980s and remains affiliated with the foreign ministry as an ambassador. Other SSRC members tend to be university administrators and include a number of career bureaucrats.³⁰ The other major source of research grants is the Education Ministry. Since external grant awards improve tenure chances, there is pressure on academics to adapt to the perceived priorities and biases of funding bodies.

As for publishing, NUS Press is one of the region's leading university presses. One recent censorship incident involved the exiled, Japan-based, Thai academic Pavin Chachavalongpun's edited volume on Thai politics. NUS Press canceled publication of the book just before going to print—after putting it through review, receiving author corrections, and signing a contract—after consulting “stakeholders inside and outside the university.”³¹ Its director noted that NUS Press was “a publisher based in the region, in a very small home market,” but did not reveal which “stakeholders” opposed the volume's publication.³² Chachavalongpun's book, *Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand*, could be read as critical of the Thai monarchy and current Thai regime, potentially falling afoul of Thailand's *lèse majesté* law. The Singapore and Thai states have historically enjoyed close relations. The Council on Southeast Asian Studies at Yale University later published the volume after another round of academic reviews.³³

The freedom to teach, like research, may be upheld or compromised at various points. Teaching involves practices further upstream, such as curriculum design and course approval, as well as those downstream, from syllabus writing and the choice of reading lists to the actual delivery of classroom instruction. Educational infrastructure, in most respects an impressive strength of Singapore's universities, is not immune from manipulation. One respondent confided that “the library was instructed by university management not to subscribe to a service that provided access to readings due to its association with critics of the government.”

Educators' attempts to expose students to new ideas and pedagogies are also politically constrained. A survey respondent recruited from overseas said, “I learned very quickly that I could not adopt the stance I would have liked—for example, when proposing a module on postcolonialism and theory it was suggested that I include ‘pro-colonial’ thinkers for ‘balance.’” One controversial case in 2019 involved a leading Singaporean poet, playwright, and writer, Alfian Sa'at, who had been hired to teach a class at Yale-NUS College (YNC) titled “Dissent and Resistance in Singapore” that included a practical element. Alfian included in the program a visit to Hong Lim Park—the only site in Singapore where protests are permissible without preapproval—and the making of protest posters.³⁴ YNC eventually canceled the course, citing concerns about possible legal ramifications.³⁵ A subsequent Yale University report by a former YNC president and Yale faculty member defended the YNC's decision, claiming that the class lacked academic

rigor and that adjustments were not made on time.³⁶ YNC and Yale both insisted that there was no challenge to academic freedom. Alfian disputes these claims, stating that he made all the necessary changes in a timely manner and in ways that were consistent with all YNC demands.³⁷

Addressing the issue in Parliament, the then-minister for education, Ong Ye Kung, asserted that the cancelation of the class did not violate academic freedom, and he accused Alfian of trying to use the class for political agitation.³⁸ Ong's remarks included a misleading reference to a poem by Alfian, which suggested that the poet was disloyal to the country. The controversy was one of the rare instances where an academic freedom issue was debated in Parliament. The price was paid mainly by the artist, and not only in economic terms—he was vilified online by trolls, cybertroopers, and government supporters, demonstrating the breadth of resources that can be brought to bear on private individuals when the status quo in Singapore's higher education sector is challenged.³⁹

One of the key questions at the heart of the YNC episode applies to most such cases in Singapore: Who exactly was responsible for the intervention? It is usually difficult to tell. The AcademiaSG study asked academics about the sources of their apprehensions. Among those who reported that they did not feel free to research or teach as they wished (see table 3.1 above), a majority attributed their assessment to explicit signals from superiors and advice from peers, as well as their own readings of the political situation (table 3.2).

Do you feel free to...	If no, what are the constraints on your autonomy? (%)		
	Explicit signals from my superiors that [activity] would not be politically welcome	Advice from peers that [activity] would not be politically welcome	My reading of the political environment
choose your preferred research area and broad agenda?	60.0	66.7	66.7
to pursue specific research projects?	48.4	71.0	71.0
shape your syllabi and reading lists as you wish?	50.0	61.5	65.4
talk about issues that may be sensitive or controversial (in class)?*	25.4	58.7	68.3

Note: Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response. Percentages shown here are conditional on respondents answering "no" to the respective questions. Refer to Table 1 for number of valid responses and % of no's among all respondents. *Response options for this question were phrased "my superiors have told me to avoid sensitive/controversial topics", "peers have advised me to avoid sensitive/controversial topics", and "I believe the political system does not welcome such discussions" respectively.

Table 3.2. Reasons why respondents do not feel free to conduct academic activities.

Not surprisingly, one's perception of the wider environment is affected by one's knowledge of instances of the modification or withdrawal of research findings for ostensibly administrative reasons. Results from an ordered logistic regression of perceptions of academic freedom show that those who have such experiences or who have observed such an incident are less likely to report experiencing academic freedom across research, teaching, and public engagement domains (table 3.3). This relationship holds after accounting for other factors such as tenure status, disciplinary background, citizenship, and the political sensitivity of the respondent's research. Among other covariates, those who are not residents (i.e., not Singaporean or Singapore PR) and those who do politically sensitive research are also less likely to experience academic freedom. The findings suggest deep-seated perceptions about restrictions on academic freedom despite the state not being visibly involved in such activity.

Variable	Odds Ratio
<i>Prior experience and/or observation of being told to modify or withdraw research findings</i>	
Never	Ref.
Once/More than once	0.35**
<i>Tenured</i>	
No	Ref.
Yes	1.13
<i>Disciplinary background</i>	
Humanities	0.24*
Social Sciences	0.68
Both	Ref.
Neither humanities or social sciences	0.27
<i>Citizenship</i>	
Singaporean	Ref.
Singapore PR	2.37
Not Singaporean or Singapore PR	0.47*
<i>Research is politically sensitive</i>	
No	Ref.
Yes	0.43*
<i>Vignette score^a</i>	0.86

Notes: *p<0.05; **p<0.01. N=156. The regression is weighted by the inverse probability of being included in the analytical sample, calculated using a binary logistic regression of inclusion on the same covariates. The dependent variable is an ordinal scale (possible range 0-5) created through the Mokken scaling procedure by taking the sum of "yes's" across the 4 items listed in Table 1 and another on whether respondents "feel free to engage the wider public in non-academic venues". The vignette score is created from scaling 4 items that use fictional scenarios to gauge how likely respondents are to judge different kinds of situations involving academic freedom as being unacceptable. A higher vignette score (possible range 0-16) suggests the respondent is likely to judge all kinds of situations as being unacceptable.

Table 3.3. Coefficients from ordered logistic regression predicting experience of academic freedom across research, teaching, and public engagement.

Politicizing Personnel Policies

Singapore's universities play a national role in the "global war for talent."⁴⁰ This is one reason why the state corporatized public universities—so they would have the flexibility to court top talent, with top dollars if need be. Universities have embraced this challenge with such abandon that their workforce policies, while not short on ambition, have been accused of lacking accountability.⁴¹

The red carpet that is rolled out for some academics is one aspect of universities in Singapore. Another reality is less talked about—the red lines that penalize and exclude academics who do not conform with the state's political vision for higher education. Although the government has never confirmed or denied this publicly, it is an open secret that it operates a political vetting system for academics. One case involved one of this paper's coauthors in 2009: NTU's president and provost informed George that he had met all the academic criteria for promotion and tenure but that they could not give him tenure because of government objections.⁴² Another case involved George's NTU colleague, Lucy Davis, who had her permanent resident reentry permit—then her permanent residency and, later, her employment pass—canceled between 2006 and 2016, apparently for her public objection to Singapore's death penalty.⁴³ NTU later indicated that Davis met the qualifications for tenure but could not continue at the university in the absence of the legal status to stay and work in Singapore—a status overseen by the Ministry of Home Affairs, not the Ministry of Education.⁴⁴ In 2017, researcher Tan Tarn How counted George and Davis among fifteen cases he was able to document of "artists and activists who say they have been denied jobs in academia or asked to leave their full-time or part-time jobs in our universities, polytechnics and sometimes schools" under dubious circumstances.⁴⁵

What many academic department administrators know is that hiring recommendations, after being provisionally approved at the university level, are sent to the MOE for clearance. This continues to be the case, even though Singapore's public universities have been corporatized and are formally autonomous. What happens next is opaque, but the screening is probably performed by a state security agency or its contractors. The MOE is unlikely to have an organic capacity to conduct security and background checks.

In most cases, approval is given promptly, and the individuals concerned have no inkling that they have been subjected to any external security clearance. In some cases, however, approval is not forthcoming. Reasons are not given, and there is no formal appeal process. A similar vetting process applies to tenure cases. For noncitizens, work permit renewals and even permanent residency status may be subjected to political vetting. Once word gets around that certain individuals have been blacklisted, they "would be given a flat no for jobs in every academic institution they applied to, jobs that were [*sic*] clearly qualified for," Tan notes.

The political vetting process is known to exist because of the several cases where university representatives have verbally informed individuals that they have not received security clearance from the education ministry. These known cases are probably an undercount since employers are not obliged to explain where or why an application got rejected. Furthermore, many individuals do not want to share their experience publicly, knowing that doing so may burn bridges with universities that they still hope to work with. Nor would most individuals want word to get around that they have been deemed a security risk.

We know of other cases since Tan's 2017 tally. Indeed, incidents of non-clearance appear to have become more frequent, suggesting a lowering of the threshold for blacklisting candidates. Several survey respondents highlighted political vetting in their remarks. Here is a selection:

- There is no academic freedom in Singapore, and that is a conscious, deliberate, and sustained policy position. Every hiring, tenure, and promotion decision is vetted by university administrators and the MOE. Further, the MOM (Ministry of Manpower) can simply cancel work permits for non-Singaporeans.
- [I]n certain specific cases with whom I'm [sic] personally familiar I feel constantly outraged at how people who have contributed so much to our society have not been valued institutionally at the same time when others have mysteriously been tenured and promoted in rapid succession in the administration.
- I had personal experience having difficulty hiring a part-time lecturer who had made some politically sensitive/controversial works, for some reason he was unable to be cleared by [the] Ministry of Education. Even though NTU is supposed to be an autonomous institution, any hires need to be vetted by the MOE and this has proven very challenging for the school I work in. In the end, this particular part-timer was not cleared by MOE and there was [sic] no reasons for this, we had to cancel the class for that semester. We never heard back about it and presumed it was for political reasons.

An entrenched practice of blacklisting may help explain why supervisors are frank enough to advise their colleagues not to make political waves (and why at least one university's institutional review board process has been expanded to

protect the institution and the researcher, not just the human subject). As one respondent said:

I think it is important, indeed, to ensure that junior faculty know how to navigate the present landscape and that certain activities don't help their tenure chances and indeed give some stakeholders active reasons to view them as a threat. It does them no good to have unnecessary obstacles thrown in their academic career before it gets off the ground, and in general, even in countries without significant non-academic interference, public controversy doesn't help a junior academic's tenure chances unless that controversy results from highly ranked journal publications.

It is not possible to state definitively what criteria are applied in the vetting process. In George's case, NTU leaders would only tell him that there was a "perception" that he posed a "reputational risk" to the university. There was no suggestion that he had conducted himself inappropriately; the same year, a *Reader's Digest* poll named him as one of Singapore's "most trusted" individuals. Apparently, it was only university leaders' reputation among government ministers that was threatened by his continued presence at NTU.

The AcademiaSG survey, concurring with the AFI ratings, suggests that the official principle of university autonomy coexists with suspected political intervention in practice. Less than one-quarter of survey respondents (22.4 percent) said that universities are largely able to exercise autonomy; the rest felt that nonacademic actors interfere at least moderately with decision-making. Only 15.5 percent of respondents said that campus integrity was comprehensively respected, with no cases of surveillance or intimidation. About half (46.5 percent) said that campus integrity was challenged or undermined, with significant cases of surveillance or intimidation. Note that the Singapore-based respondents to the survey held comparable views about academic freedom and challenges to such freedoms as the expert coders in the earlier V-Dem Institute survey.⁴⁶ Hence, there is less reason to suspect substantive differences in interpretation or understanding over acts that constitute surveillance.

Several respondents alluded to the co-optation of administrators at various levels of their institutions. "Leadership appointments are made on political grounds," alleged one. There was also reference to a "cultural mindset of conservatism, caution and also opportunity for those who may seek to benefit from implementing such values in middle management positions." Another said, "Because the country is substantially undemocratic, undemocratic practices and behavior also proliferate in academia, which generally reflects the political system."

Academics tend to be targeted for special attention when they get involved in advocacy work, Tan suggests. Others may have been outspoken during

controversies or have given public talks at civil society events. The government's boilerplate justification for limiting free speech states that freewheeling debate can threaten social order in a country riven by racial and religious divisions. In practice, however, race and religion are not the only—or even the main—no-go zones. A much wider and more fluid range of issues is considered sensitive, including “human rights, foreign workers issues, animal welfare, homosexuality and the arts,” Tan says. Critical scholarship that is confined to academic publications and conferences does not appear to raise hackles. It is when academics attempt to cross into the public sphere—writing commentaries or playing a prominent role in advocacy groups, for example—that they risk being seen as challenging the government's authority to set the national agenda. As the next section reports, more than one-third of academics surveyed perceive a taboo against engaging the wider public beyond scholarly venues.

When the Alfian Sa'at case was debated in Parliament, the education minister said that universities were given room to exercise judgment on the suitability of teachers. But he opined that teachers should not conflate teaching and political activism within the classroom. The type of political activism a person stands for is also a relevant consideration, he added, drawing a parallel with how American universities would not hire faculty who are sexist or racist. “Therefore, it is not just the content of the course but also what the instructor stands for. So, depending on the person's history and track record, educational institutions, I am sure, will consider carefully whether this is someone they want to engage at all,” he said.⁴⁷

The minister's remarks reflect the government's preference for academics (and other functional groups) to remain within their narrowly defined professional domains. The PAP continues to conjure the specter of political challengers taking cover behind the guise of journalism, the arts, and other vocations. If they wish to challenge the government's authority, they should do so openly by joining the opposition, government leaders have said. Consistent with this principle, a small handful of academics who have become opposition party candidates in recent years have been allowed to retain their academic positions. The most prominent of them is Paul Ananth Tambyah, a professor at the NUS medical school who is also chairman of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). In contrast, the current secretary-general of the SDP, Chee Soon Juan, was fired from NUS for alleged misconduct in the early 1990s soon after he first stood for election.⁴⁸ While the presence of a few high-profile opposition politicians in the ranks of academia allows the system's defenders to claim that personnel decisions are made entirely on merit, other cases keep academics guessing. Exactly how university and government decision-makers deal with specific individuals may depend on a complex mix of factors, including the perceived political threat the person poses (which is partly a function of the authorities' prevailing level of confidence) or

the anticipated negative public reaction to repressive or unfair treatment (which may be especially high if the target is a household name, such as a politician with a major opposition party). Such unpredictability contributes to a culture of self-censorship, as has been observed in other contexts.⁴⁹

Fencing in the Ivory Tower

The government’s warnings against conflating academia with unwelcome political activism reflect a belief in functional specialization: academics can enjoy wide leeway if they restrict their activities to the ivory tower and avoid venturing into the public sphere with viewpoints that are not in line with the government. As one survey respondent put it, academics seem to fall out of favor more for “political views or commentaries that have appeared in social media postings or media interviews and writings,” as opposed to their primary research. Another echoed this view, noting that academic publishing was less of an issue than “taking public intellectual positions.”

Accordingly, more than one-third (37.8 percent) of respondents said they did not feel free to engage the wider public in nonacademic venues. This wariness was predictably higher, at 48.6 percent, among academics who considered their research areas to be politically sensitive (figure 3.4).

Have you felt free to engage the wider public in non-academic venues such as news media and civil society events?

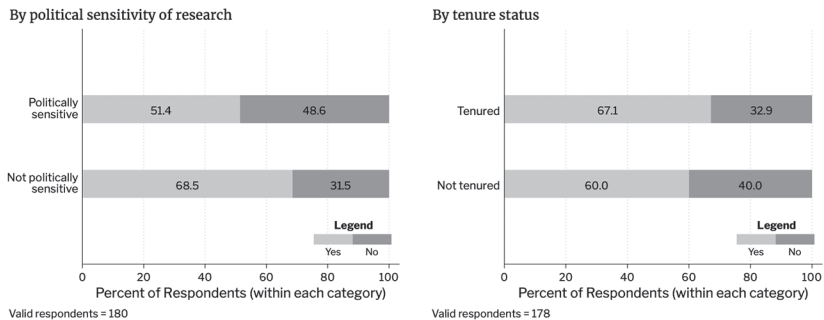


Figure 3.4. Proportion reporting freedom to engage wider public in non-academic venues, by political sensitivity of research and tenure status.

Of those who reported not feeling free, a negligible proportion (2.9 percent) agreed that academics should not play such roles. About a quarter (23.2 percent) said that their institution required them to get permission for public engagement, while about one-third (31.9 percent) said their supervisors had indicated that they should be careful about such outreach. Notably, three quarters (75.4 percent)

reported self-restraint due to their belief that the political system would be sensitive about public-facing activities.

[If you do not feel free to engage the wider public in non-academic venues such as news media and civil society events], what are the constraints on your autonomy?	%
My institution requires me to obtain permission for public engagement.	23.2
Supervisors have hinted that we should be careful about such engagement.	31.9
Peers have advised me to avoid public engagement.	34.8
I believe the political system is sensitive about such engagement.	75.4
I do not think academics should play such roles.	2.9

Note: Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response. Percentages shown here are conditional on respondents answering "no" to the question: "Do you feel free to engage the wider public in non-academic venues such as news media and civil society events?". Valid responses = 69.

Table 3.4. Reasons why respondents do not feel free to engage the wider public in non-academic venues.

In the same vein, many academics express caution about inviting outsiders to speak on campus. Asked if they felt free to invite guest speakers as they wished, 39 percent of respondents said no. Among them, more than half (55.4 percent) cited institutional rules, and almost half (46.0 percent) reported that their supervisors had advised caution about inviting controversial speakers.

[If you do not feel free to invite guest speakers as you wish], what are the constraints on your autonomy?	%
My institution requires me to obtain permission for guest speakers.	55.4
Supervisors have hinted that we should be careful about inviting controversial speakers.	46.0
Peers have advised me to avoid inviting controversial speakers.	40.5
I believe the political system is sensitive about such invitations.	56.8
I do not think it is my role to discuss such topics.	5.4

Note: Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response. Percentages shown here are conditional on respondents answering "no" to the question: "Do you feel free to invite guest speakers as you wish?". Valid responses = 74.

Table 3.5. Reasons why respondents do not feel free to invite guest speakers.

Campus activities that would be considered routine in open societies are tightly regulated in Singapore. The 1970s restrictions on student politics continue to apply. The National University of Singapore Student Union (NUSSU), for instance, can only affiliate with on-campus groups that are approved by the university president, and it has to disassociate with those that do not have such approval under its NUS Board of Trustees-approved constitution.⁵⁰ Elections for the Management Committee of NUSSU can include the triggering of special voting rights that enable incumbents to have an electoral advantage against challengers and regular union members.⁵¹ Use of on-campus space for NUS student organizations is at the discretion of the board of trustees, and invitations to persons other than students or members of NUS student societies require approval from the dean of students.⁵²

In addition to regulating the setting up of societies, Singapore has strict laws governing public events and assemblies. Organizers must apply for police permits in a process that gives officials a high degree of discretion. Universities are exempt from the licensing requirements of the Public Entertainments and Meetings Act.⁵³ In effect, this exemption gives university administrators the responsibility of regulating talks and other activities their faculty and students wish to organize. With Singaporeans having grown more politically curious and engaged in civil society, government officials and university administrators have imposed more rules on activities.

One illustrative case involved Canadian law professor Douglas Sanders, an authority on homosexuality and human rights. In 2007, he was invited to Singapore to speak at the country's signature gay rights event and at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) at NUS.⁵⁴ He was not able to come, as immigration authorities denied him a professional visit pass. Yet, Sanders had helped organize queer panels in Singapore in 2003; and in 2008, he returned to Singapore to speak on the same topic as his aborted ISEAS talk.⁵⁵ Both these unobstructed events were purely academic international conferences hosted by NUS. In contrast, the public event in 2007, in the words of a minister, "was part of the efforts of gay activists to promote their political agenda."⁵⁶

In 2019, Singapore Polytechnic cancelled a TEDxYouth talk by local deejay Joshua Simon, who is gay. The polytechnic's administrators, having seen his script, said that "certain references to his sexuality might be sensitive, given the diverse profile of the audience."⁵⁷ Following this controversy, the government has said that institutions of higher learning had autonomy but within certain bounds: they were required to "provide a common space and neutral ground for open discussions and civil discourse," and they were to respect wider societal norms and laws.⁵⁸ Restrictions on LGBTQ debates are in line with the government's declared intent to maintain what it deems to be its current compromise between religious conservatives and progressives.

Sex between men is criminalized under Section 377A of the Penal Code, which dates back to 1938. The government has acknowledged that the law is outdated and pledged that it will not proactively enforce the law against consensual gay sex. But it has resisted calls to repeal Section 377A on the grounds that such a symbolically powerful move would agitate conservatives. In a 2017 interview with the BBC, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong admitted that the law was “inherited . . . from British Victorian attitudes [but] we are not British. We are not Victorian.”⁵⁹ The issue for Lee was that doing so could be socially contentious. Similarly, law and home affairs minister, K. Shanmugam, defended 377A on the grounds that in terms of decriminalizing male homosexuality, Singapore “is a deeply split society. The majority oppose any change to Section 377A.”⁶⁰ These comments suggest an overriding concern about countermobilization in the event of the repeal of Section 377A—and more generally, about a conservative backlash against demands for recognition by the LGBTQ community.

The Internet has made it much easier for individuals to express alternative views publicly, bypassing mainstream media and other institutional gatekeepers. Digital platforms have also facilitated participation in civil society. Such technologies, however, are double-edged: they enable surveillance of academics’ viewpoints and social networks. Although little is known about such practices, it is a reasonable assumption that academic administrators, and possibly officials, rely at least partly on online traces when assessing whether academics are engaging in activities that the government frowns upon. As for offline surveillance, one survey respondent reported having witnessed “university managers planted to attend” talks on diverse families, race, and intersectionality. “They then go back to report their views on ‘how balanced these talks are’ with names on hand of the speakers.”

Besides regulating discourse on social and cultural values, universities also selectively block events featuring known critics of the government.⁶¹ Another respondent spoke of “an unspoken rule (perhaps it was raised in the past, but today it seems to be unspoken and implicitly known) not to invite politically-driven speakers (particularly from the opposition).” Respondents to the AcademiaSG survey report that at least one institution requires formal approval for on-campus speakers. Reinforcing such prohibitions are warnings against inviting “controversial” speakers from peers, supervisors, and even senior university managers. According to one respondent:

My institution requires me to obtain permission for guest speakers. Peers have advised me to avoid inviting controversial speakers. I believe the political system is sensitive about such invitations. I think it will have consequences for my career.

There are some claims that waivers are possible for online-only events, although whether this is the case is not independently verifiable at present.

The desire to politically quarantine universities may also figure in the impending closure of the Yale-NUS College, NUS's celebrated residential liberal arts experiment. Unlike the rest of NUS, student groups at Yale-NUS are not regulated by the central Office of Student Affairs. They have used their relative autonomy to engage in levels of activism not seen on Singapore's campuses for decades, playing nationally prominent roles in #MeToo, the climate crisis, and voter education campaigns. NUS will replace Yale-NUS with a new, larger college fully under NUS, ostensibly to allow more students to benefit from interdisciplinary studies. The university has stated that its unilateral decision to divorce Yale had nothing to do with academic freedom. It explicitly promised from the outset that the new college (named NUS College) would incorporate the best of Yale-NUS, notably including its liberal arts offerings.⁶² However, NUS later announced that it would drop liberal arts from the NUS College core curriculum, and it has stayed silent about whether it will permit the distinctive social engagement that is housed in Yale-NUS's student body to survive the closure.⁶³

Conclusion: Riding the Neoliberal Wave

Singapore's globally acknowledged success in developing its higher education industry makes it a possible archetype for other authoritarian states with similar ambitions. The main lesson they would draw from Singapore is that they need not fear globalization as something that would force states to converge around liberal democratic norms, as many in the West assume. Globalization has had contradictory effects, both helping and hurting academic freedom in Singapore. On the plus side, working in a highly globalized industry gives academics access to support and validation from sources that are not subject to Singapore's political conditions. As one survey respondent said:

I conduct research on Singapore, and I do not give a shit what anyone thinks about it. Do government institutions want to fund research that fits their agendas? Yes, of course. Don't take the money. I do the research, and it is published internationally. To be concerned about what a local administrator thinks of you [*sic*] work is just foolish.

But such an attitude assumes that researchers' only job is to publish in scholarly venues; it negates their public-facing roles. As the previous section observed, local administrators' political risk perceptions are a major constraint on publicly engaged scholarship. Furthermore, "international" publishing is something of a misnomer since the global enterprise of scholarly communication is based in Western, primarily American, institutions that, as one critique points out, "reflect and reinforce colonialist structures of power": "When selecting research topics, scholars from South America, Africa, and Asia often have to choose between

focusing their research on a topic of local interest or choosing topics that are more likely to be published in the top journals in their field.”⁶⁴

In such ways, neoliberal globalization has worked in tandem with domestic political forces to disincentivize research in politically sensitive areas. One macro effect has been the hollowing out of Singapore's universities: even as they excel in publishing research in top international journals, several fields lack a critical mass of academics who are focused on the context of Singapore. The decolonization of higher education from the 1950s meant the nationalization of university governance and their alignment with the new republic's development goals. But since the PAP's economic strategies were always externally oriented, concerned with turning Singapore into a hub for global trade and capital, it has not pushed universities to indigenize their social science and humanities research and teaching. On the contrary, it has promoted global benchmarks of excellence over domestic relevance.

As a result, the universities' contribution to the country's intellectual life is far more modest than their global reputation might suggest.⁶⁵ The *Singapore Economic Review*, a journal published by the Singapore-based World Scientific and housed at NTU's Department of Economics, is just one case in point. In 2020, the journal published eighty-six articles, of which just three were on Singapore.⁶⁶

Since world university ranking exercises are themselves embedded in a neoliberal ethos, it should not be surprising that their blind spots coincide with the systemic flaws of Singapore's neoliberalized higher education sector. The main ranking agencies do not give much weight to each university's contribution to social justice or democratic life, so they do not penalize countries that have restricted such activity. This lacuna has been recognized by scholars calling for rankings to incorporate direct indicators of academic freedom, such as AFI. Until then, Singapore's universities, on the strengths of their publication counts and other metrics, are likely to maintain their lofty positions in international league tables, despite the restrictions they work within.⁶⁷ Outputs from less managed areas can compensate for any fall in productivity that results from the selective targeting of topics that administrators and officials consider “sensitive.” This is not to claim that such offsetting in the numbers is necessarily the result of the conscious gaming of higher education league tables by university administrators. Such scheming is probably redundant, since there is already an elective affinity between international ranking agencies and Singapore's higher education industry.⁶⁸ Both are geared toward the commodification of education services, treating universities as brands.

Like Singapore's economic model more generally, its university governance has been able to ride the neoliberal tide, instrumentalizing higher education while constricting its emancipatory potential. Philip Holden has noted that the

“autonomous university with a strong commitment to the social”—a vision that the University of Singapore pursued briefly—has been circumscribed, both by Singapore’s developmental state and by global neoliberal market forces and their quantitative measures of excellence.⁶⁹

The state-driven policy to invite leading Western universities to develop a presence in Singapore can be seen in the same light. These high-profile international collaborations—notably with Duke University and Yale University—certainly boosted the quality and diversity of the country’s higher education sector. Their impact on academic freedom is more questionable. Opinion among the AcademiaSG survey respondents was evenly split. While 30.7 percent agreed that foreign universities have benefited academic freedom in Singapore, 37.9 percent remained neutral, while (31.3 percent) disagreed. The government did not offer formal or transparent guarantees of academic freedom to foreign universities. It gave them verbal assurances that they would have more latitude than local universities, but it also made it clear that local politics would be off-limits.⁷⁰

When steering Singapore’s universities, government leaders deployed particular narratives of modernization, professionalization, and globalization. For example, leaders decoupled the idea of professionalism from values such as independence, integrity, and public service, and they attached it to instrumental notions of service quality, productivity, and economic value. In this now-dominant mode of thinking, Philip Holden notes, “The emphasis in the university’s relation to society is largely concerned with the ‘organizational excellence’ and ‘standing’ of the university both nationally and internationally, rather than its specific societal role as a place for public debate. The envisioned autonomy is thus something that happens more within a globalized educational marketplace, rather than within civil and political society.”⁷¹

One of the ironies that emerge from this study is that while rich, developed states advocate for academic freedom, they also produce illiberal countertrends. If it is difficult to imagine a more emancipated future, it is partly because the present global democratic recession is likely to be prolonged, but also because, as Malcolm Tight says of the “neoliberal turn” in higher education around the world, “At the moment, and for the foreseeable future, neoliberalism would appear to be the only ‘game’ in town for running our universities and colleges.”⁷² Another illiberal trend in North American and European universities has been forms of campus activism that deprioritize free speech and academic freedom in the name of causes such as social and racial justice.⁷³ While their censorious impact on intellectual life may be exaggerated, the ongoing debates over practices such as de-platforming and canceling on campuses do indicate an unstable normative consensus even within liberal democracies. Several of the AcademiaSG survey respondents referred to

this in their comments to point out that Singapore's situation is not totally alien from what they observe in the West. Said one:

Academic freedom is under attack everywhere and Singapore is no longer an outlier. When academics at Berkeley, Yale, Harvard, etc. are censured, fired, "canceled," when Oxford reverses visiting fellowships because the fellow is too controversial, and debates are canceled for fear of the consequences, then it is hardly the case that Singapore is unusual.

As noted earlier, the Singapore government too has pointed to such ideological gatekeeping on American campuses to suggest that Singapore is not that different. Perhaps what is remarkable about Singapore is not that the curtailment of academic freedom occurs but that this is programmed into this system; it is a feature not a bug. In more plural contexts, restrictions at one institution are usually mitigated by openness at another; an academic who is too right-wing for a liberal university can fit in at a conservative one. In Singapore's state-dominated university sector, biases and blacklists tend to apply nationally.

Higher education and research "constitute an exceptionally rich cultural and scientific asset" that can be fully realized only in an "atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions of higher education," says UNESCO.⁷⁴ In Singapore, generations of political leaders have maintained as a matter of fundamental policy that this asset, while it continues to blossom, cannot be allowed to grow in directions that threaten the PAP's authority over the national agenda or that limit the executive's room to maneuver.

Methodological Note

The online survey was conducted from mid-April 2021 to May 2021 by Cherian George from Hong Kong Baptist University, where it received ethics approval. A total of 198 academics (response rate approximately 10 percent) responded to the survey. To be eligible, respondents had to be affiliated with a humanities and/or social science department in a local university (i.e., NUS, NTU, SMU, SUSS, or SUTD), including those from public policy, business, and law. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines were not included in the study given that academics in those fields likely face a vastly different set of challenges and incentives to research and teaching. Restraints on academic freedom in the STEM fields are also likely to differ in scope and type from those in the humanities and social sciences in a way that necessitates a substantially different survey questionnaire to properly examine.

The population of humanities and social science academics in Singapore is small (about 2,000), so an effort was made to reach all possible respondents instead of using a sampling strategy. To achieve this, the research team first

sent an invitation to participate to about 2,000 academics, using publicly listed email addresses from faculty profiles at each institution's website. Issues related to undercoverage are expected to be minimal, since most (if not all) academics in Singapore would have an online public profile and a working email address. The team then mobilized informal networks (e.g., social media channels, personal connections) to remind eligible individuals to check their inboxes and respond to the invitation. Those who were eligible but did not receive the initial invitation to participate were sent the link to the survey once they indicated their interest to the research team. While there was no way to verify if eventual respondents were eligible, the team anticipated that any possibility of reidentification would drastically reduce response rates given the perceived sensitivity of the topic.

The survey questionnaire included key demographics (e.g., tenure status, gender, etc.) and a variety of questions about academic freedom (e.g., agreement with international statements, whether respondents felt free to engage in research and teaching, etc.). It ended with an open-ended section that invited respondents to write any other comments about academic freedom in Singapore. Eighty-one respondents provided qualitative inputs. The raw data from the survey is available in anonymized and non-personally identifiable form at <https://www.academia.sg/academic-freedom-survey-2021/>.

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