Academic Freedom in Singapore

SURVEY REPORT
The survey reported in this document was administered by Cherian George (Hong Kong Baptist University). Shannon Ang (Nanyang Technological University) contributed to data analysis and the writing of the report.

AcademiaSG is a collective of Singaporean academics founded in 2019. www.academia.sg

**Suggested citation**

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The politicisation of higher education

Too many questions about academic freedom in Singapore have been avoided for too long.

In 1997, UNESCO adopted a set of universal principles for higher education that stressed the importance of academic freedom. Academics have the right to teach, carry out research work, to share their findings, and to apply their knowledge to the problems of the community, UNESCO members declared.

That right is not absolute or unlimited. In fact, academia is a highly regulated sphere even in the freest of societies. Scholars voluntarily subject themselves to rules designed to protect the rigour of their research, the ethics of their methods, and the integrity of their findings. They are expected to hold their work accountable to the public, and to fulfil a duty of care to their students. The principle of academic freedom does not free researchers or teachers from any of these professional responsibilities.

Instead, academic freedom demands that scholars are free from “fear of repression by the state or any other source” (in UNESCO’s words) so that they are free to serve their social mission. To strike this balance, standards should be set and enforced mostly by peers answering to disciplinary and ethical norms; academics and their universities should embrace public accountability without succumbing to undue pressure from powerful external actors.

Singapore’s shortcomings in this regard were the main impetus behind the formation of AcademiaSG in 2019. Our informal group got together in response to the POFMA Bill. This new law against online falsehoods epitomised the government’s philosophy that, in the public sphere, ministers’ voices enjoy certain prerogatives by virtue of their status — an epistemological position at odds with academics’ understanding of what open inquiry requires.

Most of AcademiaSG’s work over the past two years has been trying to compensate for the ill-effects of this long-term and systematic politicisation of the governance of academia in Singapore. When we decided to support Singapore Studies through our Junior Scholars webinar series, for example, it was because we worry that political disincentives and career incentives have combined to hollow out the study of Singapore in certain disciplines, resulting in an inadequate intellectual contribution to the local even as our universities have risen in global rankings.

Similarly, when our website launched its Academic Views section for essays and commentaries, it was to address Singapore’s lack of public scholarship. Despite the disincentives for critical scholarship, academic expertise in
Singapore has grown substantially over the decades, both on local campuses and globally. Mainstream media do not reflect this rich diversity of knowledgeable viewpoints. There is self-censorship at both ends: many academics are wary of venturing into the public sphere, while establishment media shut out many who are prepared to overcome their inhibitions.

But these efforts of ours are, to borrow IT jargon, little more than software patches designed to improve the functionality of a system that needs an upgrade. Even if we have been more successful in our efforts than we ever imagined possible, intellectual honesty demands that we eventually confront the elephant in the room: the state of academic freedom in Singapore.

**Global trends**

Coincidently, there has been a spike in global interest in the subject of academic freedom. Liberal democracies have been debating how ideological polarisation is affecting decisions in the academy, and whether norms that supposedly prize merit and freedom actually help entrench systemic injustices.

Globally, a separate academic freedom debate is fuelled by concerns about China’s rise as a hegemonic power — including in research, notwithstanding the state’s severe constraints on independent thought and expression. The most-cited Western ranking agencies, QS and Times Higher Education, both rank Tsinghua and Peking universities among the world’s top 25. As critical scholars have argued for decades, there is no necessary contradiction between the kind of neoliberal globalisation promoted by liberal democracies, and the political control favoured by today’s authoritarian states. The metrics of excellence embedded in global university rankings are just one manifestation of how China’s illiberal formula sits comfortably with a global order constructed by the West.

The Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) has launched an Academic Freedom Index (AFi) based on expert assessments. Most liberal democracies have AFi scores of above 0.9. In Asia, Taiwan and South Korea are close to that level, both scoring 0.87 in 2020. Singapore’s AFi score hovers at around 0.5.

There are mounting calls for such indicators to be incorporated into university rankings, a quick fix that would of course penalise China’s high-flying universities. Singapore’s would suffer collateral damage. We are not fans of this approach — not because we don’t believe in academic freedom indicators, but because we don’t believe in university rankings. Like most academics, we view rankings as a commercially-driven industry that exploits a knowledge gap between universities and their stakeholders. But whatever the implications for rankings, we need a better picture of the state of academic freedom.

**Key questions**

These are some of the questions we have:

First, do academics in Singapore share the values embodied in international statements such UNESCO’s 1997 recommendation or GPPi’s academic freedom reports? Singapore’s political system is supported by an ideology of exceptionalism, with some arguing that the republic is so unique that global human rights standards do not apply. We are curious to know if our fellow academics view academic freedom as important or irrelevant.

Second, how prevalent in Singapore universities is the sense of being constrained? We know that political restrictions do not affect all academics equally. The vast majority of STEM academics are unencumbered. Even within the social sciences and humanities, we know many of our colleagues do not feel excessively constrained. We need a better grasp of the extent of the problem as perceived on the ground.

Third, what are the mechanisms through which academic work is restricted? On paper, Singapore’s universities are autonomous. Our sense is that political pressure is largely indirect and invisible: political regulation is mostly decentralised and institutionalised within universities, and enveloped within a culture of self-censorship. These impressions, based on anecdotal evidence, need to be investigated.

The survey reported here is an attempt to fill these and related gaps in our knowledge. We believe its findings provide insights of unprecedented depth. But we refrain from making any policy recommendations. This is because surveys on their own cannot answer the Goldilocks question: if a certain proportion of respondents say they face problems, is that percentage too much, too little, or just right? This is a value judgment predicated on various normative considerations like how to balance the need for open inquiry with the state’s developmental agenda, and how far intellectuals should venture beyond society’s prevailing norms. We have our own views on this subject, but for now our purpose is to help attach numbers to the questions we posed earlier. We hope this report thus contributes to an informed national discussion about the future of academia in Singapore.

— The Editors, AcademiaSG (Linda Lim, Cherian George, Teo You Yenn and Chong Ja Ian)
Highlights

Key findings from the survey.

Attitudes towards academic freedom

Academics in Singapore appear to embrace academic freedom as a universal value. More than 90% agree that, to meet their societies’ needs, universities’ teaching and research must be independent of political and economic power. Such independence is valued equally by both local and foreign faculty.

Freedom to do research

While the majority of academics sense no restrictions on their own freedom, a significant minority do. Faculty who say they work on “politically sensitive” topics are 1.5 to 3.5 times more likely to feel constrained in their ability to research or engage the public compared with those whose work is not “politically sensitive”.

Even amongst those who do not feel personally constrained in their research, 64% acknowledge that scholars are subject to interference or incentivised to self-censor at least occasionally. For those who do feel personally constrained, 93% report the existence of interference and self-censorship.

16% of academics say they are not free to choose their preferred research area and broad agenda. 34% know of cases where academics have been told to withdraw or modify research findings for non-academic reasons; 69% of them believe the reasons were political or ideological.

Constraints in class

Some academics also feel constrained in their teaching. 14% say they do not feel free to shape their syllabi and reading lists as they wish. 39% say they cannot freely invite guest speakers; of these, one reason is that their institutions require them to obtain permission before inviting guest speakers (55%).

Students also inhibit academics. 34% of academics say they do not feel free to talk about issues that may be sensitive or controversial in class. Among these academics, 70% say one reason is that they have students who may not welcome discussing such topics; only 25% said it was because superiors had told them to avoid sensitive or controversial topics.

Especially for junior colleagues (but not only), the university environment and society as a whole is not conducive to robust, open, and polemical debate. The total opacity and unpredictability of decision making, sanctions/rewards, and promotion does not help either.'
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 can simply cancel work permits for non-Singaporeans.

Engaging with society

Of all the activities associated with academic life, engagement with the wider society is the most constrained: 38% of academics say they do not feel free to engage the wider public in non-academic venues such as news media and civil society events; the proportion is 49% among those whose work is “sensitive”. Among those who do not feel free to engage, 23% say their institutions require them to obtain permission.

Gender differences

Gender has a major impact on academics’ perceived freedom. More than twice as many women (28%) as men (11%) do not feel free to pursue specific projects. 55% of female academics do not feel free to engage the public in non-academic venues, compared with 29% of men. Gender makes a bigger difference than tenure status to academics’ perceived freedom, with tenured and non-tenured academics reporting similar levels of freedom to research and engage the public.

Institutionalised limits

Among academics who feel constrained in their research or teaching, 60% and 50% respectively received explicit signals from their supervisors that certain topics would not be politically welcome. Signals from the wider political environment constitute an equally strong source of inhibition. For example, 71% of those who did not feel free to pursue certain research projects said they were influenced by their reading of the political environment.

Although Singapore universities are described as autonomous, only 22% of academics believe that universities largely or completely exercise institutional autonomy. 31% say that non-academic actors interfere extensively with, or are in control of, university decision making.

Put yourself in the shoes of the national leadership, and frame your research and communication in a way helpful to them and the advancement of Singapore.’

Within broad cultural, social and political boundaries which might be experienced in different forms in universities anywhere in the world, I do not consider academic freedoms are curtailed in Singapore to any significant extent.’

In my field I have not felt any pressure to change my views, ideas, themes or thoughts due to external or internal pressure, not once. In fact, I think I have been able to work successfully on different projects, both with external and internal parties, including those projects that eventually resulted in sensible national policy changes!’

In my field I have not felt any pressure to change my views, ideas, themes or thoughts due to external or internal pressure, not once. In fact, I think I have been able to work successfully on different projects, both with external and internal parties, including those projects that eventually resulted in sensible national policy changes!’
SURVEY FINDINGS

Respondents’ backgrounds

It is reasonable to expect that the perception and experience of academic freedom differ according to individuals’ demographic and professional backgrounds. For instance, a tenured professor, having already attained some level of job security, may be more willing to speak out compared with a relatively junior faculty member. Whether academics hold a Singapore passport or a foreign one could affect the kind of personal risks they are exposed to. Race and gender could also influence perceptions of academic freedom.

The survey thus attempted to capture information about the respondents’ backgrounds, while still protecting their confidentiality. We find that respondents came from a wide range of backgrounds, representing a diversity of views and experiences about academic freedom in Singapore. These data are presented here in Tables 1 and 2.

As discussed in later sections, we found that academics’ sense of risk or constraint did differ depending on the perceived political sensitivity of their research, their gender, and their citizenship status. Other factors such as race, length of service, rank, and tenure status, appeared to have little bearing on their experience or perceptions of academic freedom.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender (N=189)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race (N=187)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of the majority race</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not part of the majority race</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizenship Status (N=188)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singaporean</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singaporean Permanent Resident</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Background</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Rank (N=193)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Professor</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of employment in a local academic institution (N=194)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 2 years</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 5 years</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 10 years</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary discipline (N=197)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research is politically sensitive (N=191)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much work done with international collaborators (N=196)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A minority</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About half</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A majority</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Ns in Tables 1 and 2 are not consistent as “prefer not to answer” responses are excluded. “Other” responses are also excluded from the tables when the number is small and opens up a risk of reverse identification.
Agreement with international norms

The survey aimed to assess how much Singapore academics agree with international statements concerning academic freedom. Much of the global discourse about academic freedom is grounded in human rights principles that their advocates present as having universal applicability. While most countries appear to accept the performance metrics currently embodied in university rankings, some are likely to challenge the universality of indicators such as the Academic Freedom Index (see Appendix 2).

To gauge where Singapore academics stand, the survey presented respondents with normative statements from two sources. The first and third statements in Table 3 below are drawn from a core UNESCO statement on higher education. The second statement is derived from the Magna Charta Universitatum, a declaration signed by more than 900 universities in 88 countries, including in China, Japan, and India, though none in Singapore (see Appendix 3).

### TABLE 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you agree with the following statement(s):</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) “Universities are communities of scholars preserving, disseminating and expressing freely their opinions on traditional knowledge and culture, and pursuing new knowledge without constriction by prescribed doctrines.”</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) “To meet the needs of the world around it, a university’s teaching and research must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.”</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) “All higher-education teaching personnel should have the right to fulfil their functions without fear of repression by the state or any other source.”</td>
<td>74.2</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Statements (1) and (3) are taken from UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel; (2) is from Magna Charta Universitatum 2020.

The results show that academic freedom as articulated in these statements is embraced by the vast majority of academics in Singapore, whether they are locals (i.e., Singaporean or Singapore Permanent Residents) or foreigners (Figure 1 below).
Vignettes

One limitation of the broad normative statements quoted above and other questions on academic freedom is that they allow for a range of interpretations. The term “repression”, for example, may mean different things to different people. For some, this could involve the use of physical violence to prevent academic activities or to have academic activities advance a particular line, for others the loss of jobs or funding, for instance.

The same implicit signals from superiors may be read differently by different individuals; not all may consider certain situations as problematic for academic freedom. Partly for this reason, the survey included a few vignettes: respondents were asked to rate the acceptability of specific hypothetical situations. See Table 4 below.

In Vignette 1, a department head advises an assistant professor whose work has attracted some controversy to be more careful. In Vignette 2, the university decides to vet events after a faculty member’s event is criticised by officials. In Vignette 3, an academic is transferred to a non-research unit after writing articles that have generated debate. In Vignette 4, minutes of a university meeting omit to document a controversial issue raised by one academic.

Their responses provide a better sense of what academics in Singapore consider acceptable or unacceptable practices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptability of hypothetical scenarios</th>
<th>Completely acceptable</th>
<th>Somewhat acceptable</th>
<th>Neither acceptable or unacceptable</th>
<th>Somewhat unacceptable</th>
<th>Completely unacceptable</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Dr X is an assistant professor at a local university whose work has been the subject of public debate. At an annual appraisal meeting, s/he was told by the HOD that going forward, s/he should be “more careful”.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Dr Z is a faculty member at a local university who organises an event that receives negative feedback from senior government officials. The university announces new procedures for vetting such events.</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Dr B is an associate professor at a local university who has written articles that have spurred active debates in broader Singapore society. Dr B is later transferred to other non-research based units where the workload is prohibitive for research productivity.</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) In a meeting that includes senior university management and other faculty, Dr C raises an issue that stirs some controversy. Subsequent minutes of the meeting make no mention of the discussion, and senior management do not acknowledge substantive discussion of the issue. There is no further action on the issue.</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

The findings show that clear majorities consider all the interventions described in these scenarios as somewhat or completely unacceptable. More than 90% felt this way about Vignette 3, a scenario that involved direct career consequences for the fictional faculty member. In contrast, only around 70% felt it would be unacceptable for a department head to advise caution. In the open-ended section of the survey, one respondent offered a possible explanation for why some academics are not averse to such warnings: “I think it is important, indeed, to ensure that junior faculty know how to navigate the present landscape.”
Perceptions of the general environment

To gauge Singapore academics’ general evaluation of academic freedom in the local context, the survey borrowed five questions used in a larger study conducted by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) institute. Covering key dimensions of academic freedom, V-Dem’s data are used in the academic freedom reports released by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI) and its partners. Results are summarized in Tables 5 to 9 below.

It should be noted that these questions were designed to be answered by V-Dem’s expert coders and were not intended to be administered through a survey. The conceptual and methodological pros and cons of replicating these questions in a survey are discussed in the Methodology section (Appendix 1). Appendix 2 carries the findings from the GPPI study and compares the V-Dem expert coders’ assessments with the present survey responses.

1. Freedom to Research and Teach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent are scholars free to develop and pursue their own research and teaching agendas without interference?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are, across all disciplines, consistently subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are, in some disciplines, consistently subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are occasionally subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are rarely subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are not subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 194. Question is taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) study.

‘Overall, I will say academic freedom is somewhat less than in the US, though even academics in the US have now suffered from the so-called “cancel culture” and very serious racial tensions in their research activities and public engagements. Still, I am quite comfortable with the present state of “freedom” in SG, considering how far we have come along from the earlier decades, say, in the 1980s through to the late 1990s.’

‘Stories of faculty being denied tenure, or even having their PR revoked, circulate among faculty, and while my own research is not politically sensitive for Singapore, I am always conscious of topics that may be, and recognise that approval/disapproval by the government, or by higher strata in the university of the content of what I may say or write could result in my losing my job, regardless of its academic integrity/quality.’

‘It is the case that academic freedom is under attack everywhere and Singapore is no longer an outlier.’
2. Freedom of Academic Exchange and Dissemination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent are scholars free to exchange and communicate research ideas and findings?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic exchange and dissemination is, across all disciplines, consistently subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic exchange and dissemination is, in some disciplines, consistently subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic exchange and dissemination is occasionally subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic exchange and dissemination is rarely subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic exchange and dissemination is not subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 197. Question is taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) study.

3. Institutional Autonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do universities exercise institutional autonomy in practice?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universities do not exercise any degree of institutional autonomy; non-academic actors control decision-making.</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities exercise only very limited institutional autonomy; non-academic actors interfere extensively with decision-making.</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities exercise some institutional autonomy; non-academic actors interfere moderately with decision-making.</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities exercise institutional autonomy to a large extent; non-academic actors have only rare and minimal influence on decision-making.</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities exercise complete institutional autonomy from non-academic actors.</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 196. Question is taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) study.

"Senior University management rarely set a good model and right direction, they comply with the government’s requirements and have not upheld the conviction or principle of academic or expression freedom."

"I have 0 confidence that the university would protect me from political censure from the state, or even of other states like the PRC."

"I have witnessed university managers planted to attend what are controversial talks such as “Diverse Families”, talks on Race and Intersectionality etc. They then go back to report their views on “how balanced these talks are” with names on hand of the speakers. Students are actively surveilled as well. University managers direct their subordinates to surveil students that are active advocates of certain causes such as LGBTQIA issues, sexual harrassment topics etc. Lecturers are told to look out for these students and provide feedback on them and their activities."
4. Campus Integrity

TABLE 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent are campuses free from politically motivated surveillance or security infringements?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campus integrity is fundamentally undermined by extensive surveillance and severe intimidation, including violence or closures.</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus integrity is to a large extent undermined by surveillance and intimidation, at times including violence or closures.</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus integrity is challenged by some significant cases of surveillance or intimidation.</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus integrity is to a large extent respected, with only minor cases of surveillance or intimidation.</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus integrity is comprehensively respected; there are no cases of surveillance or intimidation.</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 187. Question is taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) study.

5. Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression

TABLE 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent is there academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression related to political issues?</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Censorship and intimidation are frequent. Academic activities and cultural expressions are severely restricted or controlled by the government.</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression are practiced occasionally, but direct criticism of the government is mostly met with repression.</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression are practiced routinely, but strong criticism of the government is sometimes met with repression.</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are few limitations on academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression, and resulting sanctions tend to be infrequent and soft.</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are no restrictions on academic freedom or cultural expression.</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 190. Question is taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) study.

Overall, findings show that most Singapore academics perceive academic freedom across these five dimensions to be at least moderately and/or occasionally curtailed. For instance, 77.5% of respondents report at least moderate interference by non-academic actors (Table 7). An exception, however, is campus integrity — most respondents note that campus integrity is by and large respected, with only minor (38.0%) or no cases (15.5%) of surveillance or intimidation on campus (Table 8). As shown in Appendix 2, the survey responses are broadly in sync with the assessments by V-Dem’s expert coders.

While the present study was not intended to be comparative (unlike the GPPI report), several respondents used the open-ended questions to volunteer their views on where Singapore stands relative to the West. While some stated or implied that they were giving up some freedom by working in Singapore, several pointed out that even universities in the West are experiencing challenges, including from “cancel culture”.

“Within broad cultural, social and political boundaries which might be experienced in different forms in universities anywhere in the world, I do not consider academic freedoms are curtailed in Singapore to any significant extent,” one said.
Freedom to research

In addition to soliciting their perceptions of the general state of academic freedom, the survey sought to gather Singapore academics’ direct knowledge of and experience with curtailments of academic freedom. Respondents were asked if they felt free to operate across the domains of research, teaching, and public engagement. This section highlights the findings concerning academics’ freedom to research. Because restrictions on academic freedom may not be overt, the survey asked about a subtler form of curtailment — the use of administrative criteria or reasoning in asking academics to modify or withdraw their research findings.

About a third (33.7%) of respondents reported having been told (or having others they know being told) to modify or withdraw their research findings for administrative reasons (Figure 2 above). A large majority of these respondents (88.7%) were not convinced that the administrative reason given was valid, with most (91.5%) among them attributing it to political or ideological sensitivity (Table 10 below). More than half of these unconvinced respondents also believed the decision was made at the level of university management (60.0%) and/or the Ministry of Education or beyond (53.3%) (Table 11 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for intervention</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political/ideological sensitivity</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal differences with someone in authority</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>95.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 47. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response. Percentages shown here are conditional on respondents indicating they did not believe the administrative reason given for modifying or withdrawing their research findings were valid.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of intervention</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MOE or beyond</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>46.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University management</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/School/Department</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My immediate supervisor</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 45. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response. Percentages shown here are conditional on respondents indicating they did not believe the administrative reason given for modifying or withdrawing their research findings were valid.
Results show that while most respondents felt free to research, a small but not insignificant minority report feeling constrained across these dimensions. 15.7% of respondents did not feel free to choose their preferred research area and broad agenda and 16.4% did not feel free to pursue specific research projects (Figure 3 below).

For each item that respondents reported not feeling free, follow-up questions were posed to elicit reasons for this. Academics who engaged in politically sensitive areas of research were less likely to feel free. For instance, those who considered their research area politically sensitive were more likely to report not feeling free to choose their preferred research area and broad agenda, compared with those who did not consider their research area politically sensitive (24.0% vs 9.1%; Figure 4 below).

---

**Research agenda, projects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you felt free to choose your preferred research area and broad agenda?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid respondents = 191

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you felt free to pursue specific research projects?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid respondents = 189

**Political sensitivity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you felt free to choose your preferred research area and broad agenda?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politically sensitive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid respondents = 185

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you felt free to pursue specific research projects?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politically sensitive</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid respondents = 184

---

‘The censorship I have experienced so far has been blatantly political, e.g. OB markers when findings are related to race, class or other sensitive topics, deletions of any possibility that the government may be deficient, and additions to show what the government has done.’

‘I have lots of freedom carrying out all my research in Singapore. In fact, I get a lot of support, both in terms of funding and administration, from my university to carry out all my research endeavours and across all topics. I am very happy and thankful to be an academic in this city state.’

---
Explicit signals from supervisors and/or peers, as well as their own reading of the political environment, are major reasons why Singapore academics feel inhibited in their activities. For instance, 71.0% of respondents reported receiving advice from peers that pursuing a specific research project would not be politically welcome (Table 12 below).

**TABLE 12**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you feel free to...</th>
<th>If no, what are the constraints on your autonomy? (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit signals from my superiors that [activity] would not be politically welcome</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice from peers that [activity] would not be politically welcome</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My reading of the political environment</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to pursue specific research projects?</td>
<td>48.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>71.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Figure 3 for % of no’s among all respondents.

I do think it varies depending on your research topic and interests. I feel that I am able to explore topics in Singapore that would have never received proper recognition and funding in places like the US (American funders don’t care about the issues I study). However, I have friends (mostly in Political Science) who feel they are unable to do their work because it is considered “politically sensitive.”

Ultimately, I stopped my research on migration-related issues in Singapore due to clear signals that I was both putting my job at risk and in danger of running afoul of the government which perceived similar work (by other colleagues) to be “inappropriate political activity by foreigners”.

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 from publishing your data. If you have a supportive head, you are fine. But I do not.

Much of this seems to be in search of a martyr. 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 your work is just foolish. Grow a pair.”
The survey also looked at Singapore academics’ experience of doing research with government agencies. The conduct of legitimate research can be compromised if there are restrictions on accessibility (e.g., to data, sites, or respondents). A lack of accessibility forces some types of research to be less rigorous than desired, and renders others impossible to conduct. Singapore academics may anticipate these difficulties and avoid these types of research altogether. One respondent said: “The lack of access to government data, archives is a serious setback to academic inquiry on questions of Singaporean interest.”

Engagement with government agencies on research projects appears minimal, aside from research funded by government agencies through open grant calls (e.g., through the Ministry of Education’s Academic Research Fund, or the Social Science Research Thematic Grant).

Most respondents did only a “minority” (35.1%) or “none” (47.6%) of their research in collaboration with local government agencies (Figure 5 above). A large majority of respondents did only a “minority” (41.1%) or “none” (43.8%) of their research based on government-controlled data or sites.

It seems unlikely that this is because such access is not needed. “There is not much incentive to work with government agencies on projects as they will never allow the findings to be published,” one respondent said. This opinion conforms with the majority view expressed in the survey.

There is an entire network in place to school scholars on how to successfully get through the system without pushing the OB markers. Example, grant funding by MSF and MOE etc are determined by how you publish on specific topics. These are very well manufactured strategies and tactics by the University and MOE to ensure that “unsafe scholars” cannot find space in local institutions, so it creates a university environment that is as free from advocacy as possible.

There is not much incentive to work with government agencies on projects as they will never allow the findings to be published. Only young, emerging academics will do so to build up their “street cred.”
Among those who did at least some research without government-controlled data or access (98.4% of all respondents, Figure 5 on the previous page), 69.5% cited the existence of overly restrictive or onerous conditions as a main reason why their research did not rely on government-controlled data or access (Table 13 below). None reported that this was because the nature of their research topic did not require it; 43.9% noted that the required data are already publicly available.

Among those who did research requiring government-controlled data or access (56.2% of all respondents, Figure 5 on the previous page), most respondents (73.8%) stated that this was mainly because the nature of the research topic required it (Table 14 below). A sizable minority (39.8%) indicated that data or access from government agencies were the only available resources.

### TABLE 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access not needed</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data/sources that are required are already publicly available (i.e., not controlled by the state)</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>56.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I avoid research topics that could entail complications in access, approval, or publication</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stipulated conditions for data access are too restrictive or onerous</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of the research topic does not require such data/access</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>96.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 187. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response. Percentages shown here are conditional on respondents doing any research that does not require data/access to sites/respondents controlled by government agencies.

### TABLE 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Access needed</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The nature of the research topic requires such data/access</td>
<td>73.8</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding requirements (e.g., research grant is from a government agency)</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>89.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data/access from government agencies are the only available resources</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A conscious choice to use such data/access for my research</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents for this question = 103. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one response. Percentages shown here are conditional on respondents doing any research that requires data/access to sites/respondents controlled by government agencies.

---

Administrative data is extremely difficult to access. In case this data is accessible, or generated within a research center (I have direct experience with this scenario), research is subject to severe restrictions, and the university itself (or MOE, which controls it, it’s not clear who is making the judgement call) has preliminary vetting power over not only actual publication, but, in principle, even simple academic presentations.

Politically controversial topics will never be funded as most funding is determined by government agencies.

Try getting statistics on suicide in Singapore. Good luck.
Freedom to teach

A minority of respondents (14.1%) did not feel free to shape their syllabi and reading lists (Figure 6 below). A larger proportion of respondents (34.4%) did not feel free to talk about sensitive or controversial issues in class, with female faculty and foreign faculty reporting much higher than average levels of non-freedom (see the next page).

If there was any soft/unofficial warning to my colleagues from seniors (e.g. Singaporean professors) about academic freedom, it was limited to our undergraduate teaching or events involving political activists (or activist scholars), which I never personally experienced.

When I was recruited to Singapore I was promised academic freedom, but in practice have felt stifled. In terms of my teaching, 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”.

Feeling like one is unable to stand openly with student activists is demoralizing.

The limits I have personally experienced in academic freedom involve teaching. In the first case, university management strongly cautioned against a guest speaker (a Singaporean critical of the government) and, due to university reluctance to allow the guest speaker, I eventually gave up on the effort. In the second case, 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.
Gender had a powerful influence on academics’ freedom around class discussions. Female academics were less likely to feel free compared with male academics (54.7% vs 72.4%; Figure 7).

Foreigners were also less likely to feel free to shape their syllabi and reading lists, compared with those who were citizens or residents (81.0% vs 91.2%; Figure 8).

Self-censorship is a huge issue. Also misogyny is another significant limit on freedom of expression.
Not all academics, even in the absence of political repression, feel free to teach what they want. Academic freedom also requires freedom from stifling university administration and from escalating accreditation requirements.

**SOURCES OF CONSTRAINT**

50.0% of respondents received explicit signals from superiors that shaping their syllabi a certain way would not be politically welcome, while 65.4% cited their own reading of the political environment as a key restraint on their freedom to teach (Table 15).

TABLE 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you feel free to...</th>
<th>Explicit signals from my superiors that [activity] would not be politically welcome</th>
<th>Advice from peers that [activity] would not be politically welcome</th>
<th>My reading of the political environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shape your syllabi and reading lists as you wish?</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>65.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Figure 6 for % of no’s among all respondents.

When discussing sensitive or controversial issues in class, students are also a source of inhibition. 69.8% of respondents who did not feel free to discuss sensitive issues in class reported that students may not welcome such discussion (Figure 9). In contrast, only a small fraction of these respondents felt that it was not their role to discuss such topics (12.7%).

**Classroom dynamics**

**[If you do not feel free to talk about issues that may be sensitive or controversial in class,] what are the constraints on your autonomy?**

- My superiors have told me to avoid sensitive or controversial topics: 25.4%
- Peers have advised me to avoid sensitive or controversial topics: 58.7%
- I may have students who do not welcome discussing such topics: 69.8%
- I believe the political system does not welcome such discussions: 68.3%
- I do not think it is my role to discuss such topics: 12.7%
- Other: 9.5%

Valid respondents = 63
Respondents could select more than one option for this question
Freedom to engage

Public engagement for academics may take the form of inviting guest speakers into the classroom, and/or going out to engage the wider public in non-academic venues. A sizeable minority report not feeling free to invite guest speakers as they wished (38.9%; Figure 10), or to engage the wider public in non-academic venues (37.8%). One respondent commented that academic publishing was not an issue, but “taking public intellectual positions ... is the real question”. As with the freedom to teach, many more women than men reported feeling not free in these respects (next page, Figure 12).

Reaching out

Have you felt free to invite guest speakers as you wish?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid respondents = 190

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid respondents = 185

Those engaged in politically sensitive areas of research were also more inhibited in the public engagements, compared with those who did not do research in politically sensitive areas. For instance, only 51.4% of academics who did politically sensitive research felt free to engage the wider public in non-academic venues, compared with 68.5% among those who did not consider their work to be politically sensitive (Figure 11).

Political sensitivity

Have you felt free to invite guest speakers as you wish?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Politically sensitive</th>
<th>Not politically sensitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes: 47.3</td>
<td>Yes: 70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No: 52.7</td>
<td>No: 30.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid respondents = 184

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Politically sensitive</th>
<th>Not politically sensitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes: 51.4</td>
<td>Yes: 68.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No: 48.6</td>
<td>No: 31.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Valid respondents = 180
Like in the classroom, female academics felt more constrained about external engagement compared with their male counterparts (Figure 12). More than half of women said they did not feel free to invite guest speakers (50.9% compared with 33.1% of men), and to engage the wider public in non-academic venues (54.5% compared with 28.7% of men).

Apart from signals from peers and supervisors, institutional requirements to obtain permission also inhibited academics’ public engagement. 55.4% of respondents reported the need to obtain permission as a constraint on inviting guest speakers, while 23.2% reported it as inhibiting their public engagement (Table 16).

**TABLE 16**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internalised constraints</th>
<th>If no, what are the constraints on your autonomy? (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel free to...</td>
<td>My institution requires me to obtain permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for [activity]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>invite guest speakers*</td>
<td>55.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as you wish?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engage the wider public</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in non-academic venues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>such as news media and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civil society events?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 Figure 10 for % of no’s among all respondents. *The 2nd and 3rd response options for this question were “Supervisors have hinted that we should be careful about inviting controversial speakers”, and “Peers have advised me to avoid inviting controversial speakers”, respectively.

Context matters a lot. Prior experience of the Govt official with the academic also plays a part. I’ve always felt you can say just about anything; it comes down to how it is couched.”
Systemic resilience

In this final section of findings we look at factors that, in theory, might buffer or push back against encroachments on academic freedom. In particular, we look at what the survey data say about tenure, foreign influence, professional solidarity, and institutional autonomy.

**TENURE SYSTEM CONTRIBUTES TO CAUTION**

Within academic circles, it is widely assumed that with tenure comes greater independence. Indeed, a core purpose of tenure systems is to strengthen academic freedom by enabling faculty to advance the boundaries of knowledge and challenge existing doctrines without jeopardising their employment. Tenure systems achieve these goals when they are — and are widely perceived to be — independent from external pressures. But survey respondents suggest that Singapore’s tenure system, perceived to be subject to political influence, contributes to the resilience of the country’s constraints on academia.

Responses to the open-ended questions indicate that the need to secure tenure keeps untenured faculty focused on achieving numerical performance benchmarks while avoiding types of research, teaching and engagement for which they may be penalised for crossing political lines. On the other side of the hurdle, the survey does not reveal evidence that tenured faculty feel freer from political restrictions compared with untenured faculty. Tenured and untenured academics report similar levels of feeling free to talk about sensitive or controversial issues in class (64.5% vs 67.3%; these and the following data are not pictured), choose their preferred research area (85.9% vs 83.2%), as well as to engage the wider public in non-academic venues (67.1% vs 60.0%). Slightly larger differences emerged between tenured and untenured academics in the areas of shaping syllabi (91.1% vs 81.9%) and inviting guest speakers (68.0% vs 57.4%).

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 instead give some stakeholders active reasons to view them as a threat.

As Judith Butler has argued, censorship is also productive. The institutional production of academic subjects through a sense of precarity and a productivist logic blunts the critical edge of scholarly thinking. In my university, the biggest concerns are with tenureship and promotions.

I think the questions don’t acknowledge self-censorship as an instinct, separate from explicit external pressures.

I don’t believe in the strong form of academic freedom in the sense of idealising the academy as an institution responsible only to itself. At the same time, I don’t agree either with heavy-handed state repression, although I agree that the state and the public are legitimate stakeholders as funders of academic activity. I think what works well is having persons of integrity as faculty and administrators who see it as their responsibility to work towards furthering principled academic freedom, and protecting their colleagues who rub those in power the wrong way, while accepting that it is also not inconsistent to have a dialogue with stakeholders who might be opposed to certain lines of inquiry.
ACADEMATIC | ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN SINGAPORE

Another common assumption is that Singapore universities will become more liberal through greater exposure to “Western” academics and institutions. Although this may indeed have been happening, the survey suggests that the resilience of Singaporean norms and practices should not be underestimated.

Respondents were asked whether the presence of foreign universities in Singapore helped academic freedom. The answers were normally distributed, with equal numbers agreeing and disagreeing (Figure 13 below). Those who expressed a view about foreigners working in Singapore universities in their qualitative comments were also split. For example, one said that foreigners found it harder to adjust to Singapore’s academic freedom; another spoke of Western academics being beholden to the government and helping to keep faculty under control.

**FIGURE 13**

Singapore’s higher education industry has become more plural, with several foreign universities setting up colleges, departments and programmes in partnership with Singaporean institutions.

Do you think such partnerships have benefitted academic freedom in Singapore?

- Strongly agree: 5.6
- Agree: 25.1
- Neutral: 37.9
- Disagree: 22.6
- Strongly disagree: 8.7

Valid respondents = 195

Local faculty seems to be much more relaxed about potentially problematic issues. Maybe because they know intuitively what goes and what doesn’t. I noticed that foreign faculty tend to censor themselves and students much more than local.’

My work generally aligns with the government’s stated interests. But even if it did not, I am a guest in this country and, for that reason alone, would abide tacit restrictions on my work. Fortunately, I have not experienced any such pressure.’

For my own research area, I don’t have anything to worry. However, it is hard to figure out where to draw the line when it comes to discussing politically sensitive issues in class and on social media. I can’t tell what is “okay” and what is not for a foreigner, by looking at the kinds of comments that are posted online.’

As a foreign faculty, I think you know what you’re getting into when you come here.’
A sense of collegiality and professional solidarity can help protect and enhance academic freedom. But since most academics do not feel personally constrained, such solidarity may be lacking.

As one respondent noted, “Certain institutions and faculties within institutions are likely to face more constraints than others, which also means that certain scholars care more about the issue of censorship/repression than others (e.g. arts/social sciences vs STEM).” This academic also noted that although scholars ought to be united, there is no association or union representing academics.

Does the lack of professional organisation and the narrowly targeted nature of controls make scholarly solidarity more elusive? In line with this intuition, the survey finds that one’s own experience of restriction is a major predictor of whether one perceives limitations on academic freedom more generally. Among respondents who say that they do not feel free to choose their research, 93.3% say scholars in general are subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor at least occasionally. The figure falls to 63.5% among those who feel free in their own research (Table 17 below).

### TABLE 17

**Personal experience vs perception of general state of academic freedom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent are scholars free to develop and pursue their own research and teaching agendas without interference?</th>
<th>Have you felt free to choose your preferred research area and broad agenda?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are, across all disciplines, consistently subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are, in some disciplines, consistently subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are occasionally subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are rarely subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are not subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 159 30

Note: Column percentages are shown. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Valid respondents = 189. Question is taken from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) study.

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“There’s a lot of space to do certain types of research in SG, even research about SG which is somewhat critical of the place and people. AND it’s also true that scholars in SG researching SG institutions and government, or active in public conversations about local politics and issues face workplace scrutiny, pushback and precarity. The generally wide berth provides the rhetoric of “reasonableness” for the restrictions: “You can do these 1000 other things — why do you *insist* on these few that we’ve said are off limits?”

Most people who complain about lack of academic freedom fail to communicate in a way where they present themselves as wanting to help advance ideas good for the continued success of Singapore, but instead present themselves as heroes who seek to be different and want to advance their personal agendas.”
The survey findings suggest that most of the constraints on academic freedom are not felt as direct, external interventions. Political constraints have been institutionalised within universities. This is most apparent in protocols requiring faculty to get permission from their supervisors before engaging with civil society or the press, and inviting controversial speakers (Table 16 on page 23).

While departmental or university administrators may exercise the most immediate and direct controls, academics affected believe that the ultimate source of pressure is the state. The majority cite the wider political environment as a key inhibitor (Tables 12, 15, 16). The education ministry is believed to contribute to censorship (Table 11 on page 14), and 77.5% believe universities exercise only “some” institutional autonomy, at most (Table 7 on page 12). In their additional remarks, many respondents pointed to political controls having been internalised through faculty appraisals and even ethics review procedures, making it hard to distinguish professional peer appraisals from political supervision.

I’ve seen many many young academics starting out with an important critical voice that becomes mellower, eventually conforming to state narratives over time. Academics whose research fits very well into the state’s narratives have a very high degree of academic freedom. In fact, they are rewarded constantly with govt research grants, they get promoted faster. Once in positions of power, they naturally fall in line with the establishment and will even mentor other younger academics to do the same. Power is intoxicating, addictive and self-perpetuating. Rewards and potential rewards are often powerful drivers of compliance, coupled with the fact that non-compliance will lead to very serious consequences. The state often works hand-in-hand with the university admin to do this — academics have been warned by their Deans, HODs etc and their jobs, research grants are always on the line.

University officials may be the primary agents repressing academic freedom. I believe there are at least two reasons for this. (1) University officials may be excessively fearful of government sanctions for academic speech, when in fact no such sanctions will be imposed. Or, (2) government sanctions imposed on universities for controversial academic speech may be difficult to trace back to the speech that elicited them; this way, the government retains plausible deniability against charges of censorship. So university officials may only appear to be the primary agents of censorship, when they are actually responding to signals from the government.

What strikes me most as a relatively new faculty is the power of self-censorship at both the individual and university level. The university is primarily concerned about reputation management, with little incentive to back faculty who engage in more sensitive or controversial research.

Leadership appointments are made on political grounds. None of these is explicit but it is understood that dissenters don’t stay in the job.

It’s not so much whether there is direct political directive or interference (which I understand there is plenty in some institutions), but it’s more insidious as a cultural mindset of conservativity, caution and also opportunity for those who may seek to benefit from implementing such values in middle management positions.
As long as I do research relating to my own country, I will survive working in Singapore. Anything to do with Singapore is sensitive, red tape, highly surveilled etc. Self-censorship becomes a norm for some of us.

My sense is that we have space to discuss several controversial and “sensitive” issues within the confines of the classroom but the tacit codes of Singapore academia suggest that one shouldn’t step beyond that space and contribute to the the wider public sphere (critical newspaper articles, for example).

Lingering questions

This survey report is not intended as the final word on academic freedom in Singapore. While it presents empirical data of unprecedented depth and detail, it can only serve as a starting point for discussion. Some aspects of academic freedom cannot be illuminated through a survey, because the facts are only known to government officials and senior university administrators.

Other dimensions of academic freedom may not be readily apparent when the survey was designed and have surfaced in the course of the study. They require further investigation.

The policy implications of the findings are, furthermore, open to debate. As noted in the introduction, whether a particular finding is cause for contentment or concern depends on the reader’s normative position on whether and how the state should police scholars’ investigation and discussion of particular topics. This report can only be one starting point for such discussions.

Here, we offer questions that the survey suggests are relevant and timely for further investigation and discussion.

Non-academic factors in personnel decisions

Several respondents referred to what has long been an open secret in higher education in Singapore: the practice of political vetting in hiring and tenure decisions. Academics’ awareness of this opaque vetting system — which apparently extends to work permit and residency applications for foreign faculty — is probably the main inhibitor of their exercise of free inquiry and communication. The Ministry of Education and university administrators can provide more transparency, providing a detailed explanation of all criteria that go beyond the standard research, teaching and service performance indicators contained in internal staff guidelines. Such transparency will allow individuals to make informed decisions about whether and how to work as academics in Singapore. It will also allow Singaporeans to assess if such restrictions on academic freedom are in the public interest.

Academic freedom is also a gender issue

Abundant research elsewhere tells us that rules regulating free speech and other civil liberties, even when applied neutrally to all, can systematically disadvantage some. Historical burdens may make it harder for certain minorities to use freedoms that the majority take for granted. This survey found strong evidence that constraints on academic freedom — particularly relating to the freedom to express oneself in the classroom and in the public sphere — affect female faculty far more than men. Exactly why this is so requires further study. But what is already clear is academic freedom is, in part, a gender issue. A more gender-diverse academic community — where women are not only seen but also heard — cannot be achieved without greater academic freedom.
It is not a good situation; there are definite problems in academic freedom in Singapore — especially in the freedom to communicate about contentious issues in wider society and publics outside university. Lack of academic freedom holds Singapore back — in terms of its government’s aims — but also in terms of the benefits and roles of universities culturally and social.

I hope you will undertake hopefully more studies that look at the role of metrics and quantitative worldviews in distorting the incentive structures, behaviour and even P & T structures.

Internalisation of political supervision

The study reveals various ways in which the government’s political interests have been internalised by universities. University autonomy in the Singapore context amounts to a decentralisation of censorship and control: the state entrusts to university administrators and middle managers part of the responsibility of political supervision. In some cases, internal rules and guidelines include requiring faculty to obtain permission before engaging with the public; and adding an avenue for political checks to supplement standard research ethics clearance procedures. In other cases, political checks are not formalised, but take the form of collegial advice from supervisors. Official justifications for limits to civil liberties in Singapore tend to focus on the inflammatory potential of race and religion. However, the restrictions being practiced go far beyond. Institutions’ varied adaptations require closer study.

Impact on Singapore Studies

It is clear that political pressures do not affect the majority of academics. However, it is also clear that the distribution of pressure and punishment is not random. It affects research topics perceived to be politically sensitive, mostly concerning Singapore society; and activities that bridge the gap between the ivory tower and the wider public. The cumulative impact of these targeted interventions require closer attention. It is likely to have led to a systemic under-capacity in Singapore academia’s ability to contribute to society in precisely those national debates that need to be more plural and better informed. Any such under-contribution is not likely to be detected in global university rankings, but its social impact may be long-term and profound.

Acknowledgments

AcademiaSG thanks the academics who participated in the survey, and the many who sent words of encouragement for this effort.
Methodology

Data collection

The survey for this report was conducted from April to May 2021, with data collection approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Hong Kong Baptist University (REC/20-21/0429). In total, 2,061 academics affiliated with the humanities, social science, business, and law schools from five local universities (National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore Management University, Singapore University of Technology and Design, and Singapore University of Social Sciences) were invited to participate in this study. Invitations to local academics were sent via email, using publicly available email addresses on their institutional webpages. The survey was anonymous (i.e., we did not collect any personal identifiers), and respondents provided informed consent before participating. A total of 198 unique responses were received during the study period.

Survey questionnaire

The questionnaire covered a range of areas — from agreement with international statements to personal experiences of academic freedom.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject, questions about demographic characteristics were calibrated to ensure minimal risk of re-identification (e.g., we did not collect information about respondents’ specific discipline or department), while still allowing detection of interesting patterns in the distribution of academic freedom.

In addition to closed-ended questions, we also invited respondents to provide open-ended inputs on the subject of academic freedom, and feedback on the survey itself. Extracts from these open-ended remarks are reproduced in this report, with minor editing (for spelling, punctuation and grammar).

Most of the survey questions were original and crafted to suit the Singapore context.

Questions in the section “Perceptions of the general environment” (Tables 5 to 9) were borrowed from a study conducted by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) institute. Readers should be aware that while the question wordings and response options are the same, there are important differences in purpose and administration between the two studies. The V-Dem study questions were designed for expert coders to answer, together with the use of anchoring vignettes. This process allowed the V-Dem study team to make meaningful cross-country comparisons, since anchoring vignettes provide a reference point. Expert coders would also have more content knowledge about the field of academic freedom. However, since the V-Dem study relied solely on expert coders, they also had fewer observations for each variable (<10 observations in any given year for Singapore). The present survey was not aimed at cross-country comparisons or to derive an expert opinion. Rather, its purpose is to find out academics’ perceptions based on their own experiences. Despite these differences in the way questions were used, comparing V-Dem’s expert coded data with our survey data using the Wilcoxon rank-sum test yielded no meaningful differences — in other words, there is no evidence that the responses come from different populations.

QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE

Is the survey representative?

The study did not aim to cover all academics but only those in the humanities, social sciences and certain professional schools. Whether the eventual respondents matched the profile of the population we reached out to (in terms of rank, nationality, gender, and so on) cannot be ascertained since we do not have the data for that population. However, the respondents do include a broad range of academics (Tables 1 and 2), which ensures we get a good diversity of viewpoints. We leave it to interested parties to download the public version of the data and make statistical adjustments as required for their specific needs.

Isn’t the response rate low?

198 out of 2,061 potential respondents (9.6%) may seem low, but readers should bear in mind that we contacted virtually the entire population of academics within our target areas/schools. Most surveys contact only a small subset of their target population. The response rate cited in such cases may seem larger, say 20%; but if only 10% of the population was contacted, it would mean that respondents actually made up only 2% of the population. All things considered, our 9.6% response rate is reasonable.
One minor change was made to the preamble of this section after the survey had started. We added the prompt “Consider the Singapore context as you answer [these questions]”. (See the Questionnaire, Appendix 1A.) This was in response to early feedback we received, calling for clarification. This amendment was made after the first 22 responses had been collected. Analysis of the responses collected before and after making this change did not reveal systematic differences.

At one point in the survey we ask respondents “Based on your current trajectory, how likely do you think it is that you will successfully obtain tenure?”. The first 46 respondents were made to answer this question regardless of whether they had obtained tenure, even though those already tenured should not have had to respond to this question. Nonetheless, we correct this error in post-processing of the data by re-coding responses to this question as “missing” if respondents reported having tenure.

**Data analyses**

Readers should treat results presented in this report as describing the sample, rather than the entire population of academics in the humanities and social sciences. The sample is not a probability-based sample, so we do not present p-values from the usual statistical tests meant for such data (e.g., t-tests, Chi-squared tests). This does not mean that no inference can be drawn about the larger population of local academics, but that this requires careful methodological choices (e.g., about post-stratification weights, prior probability distributions, choice of covariates) that require justification beyond the scope of this report. Researchers wishing to conduct their own analyses of the dataset can make these decisions for themselves.

Most of the results presented here reflect findings from the overall sample (e.g. Figure 3). In the sections on “Freedom to research”, “Freedom to teach”, and “Freedom to engage”, however, we do present select results along the lines of other factors, such as gender (e.g., Figure 7). These are highlighted because we consider differences across these factors (e.g., gender, nationality, political sensitivity of research) most salient, compared with other factors. To determine this, we estimate a multivariable binary logistic regression for each item, predicting the probability of a “no” response. Covariates included length of employment, tenure status, broad discipline, citizenship, race, gender, and the political sensitivity of one’s research. We then focused on the factors that had the largest influence on the outcome. Nonetheless, interested parties can download the publicly available data to explore how other factors may be associated with certain outcomes.

**Access to our data**

https://www.academia.sg/academic-freedom-survey-2021/

A public version of the dataset is available via link above, so that interested parties can conduct their own analyses. This dataset contains most of the data we collected, but some demographic variables and observations are removed to better protect respondents from re-identification. The open-ended remarks are also removed for the same reason. Based on analyses conducted by the study team, it is unlikely that the public form of the dataset will produce substantially different results from the full dataset, so interested parties should still feel confident to draw insights from it.

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**Aren’t respondents more likely to be those who are interested in the topic because they think there’s a problem with academic freedom? Does this skew the results?**

It is true that those who have stronger views on the subject of academic freedom may be more likely to respond to the survey. Yet on the other hand, some with strong views may have chosen not to participate because they fear surveillance. The bias, if any, could go either way. This is the reason we included vignettes (Table 4) in the survey — to account for variations in the way some respondents perceive certain situations as more or less problematic for academic freedom, compared with other respondents. We expect that those with strong views will be more likely to report all sorts of situations as being problematic. Including these vignettes allows us to address at least some of the concern around having a more biased group of respondents. Interested parties can download the data and see how adjusting for these tendencies with statistical tools might affect the results. Our own further analyses of these data reveal that these tendencies do matter for some areas, but they do not change most (if not all) of our conclusions.

**How can you tell if respondents are being honest?**

As with most surveys, there is no way to guarantee that respondents are being completely honest. However, one of the main reasons that respondents may not be honest is for fear of reprisal. To manage this risk, we designed the survey to minimize any professional or political risk to respondents: we kept it anonymous and took steps to safeguard against the reverse identification of respondents through the data.
Questionnaire

We would like to first ask you some questions about yourself.

D_1 What is your rank at your academic institution?
  1 Assistant Professor
  2 Associate Professor
  3 Full Professor
  4 Lecturer
  5 Senior Lecturer
  6 Other (please specify: __________)  99 I prefer not to answer

D_2 Which career track are you on?
  1 Research or academic track
  2 Teaching, practice, or professional track
  3 Other (please specify: __________)  99 I prefer not to answer

D_3 How long have you been employed in an academic institution in Singapore?
  1 0 to 2 years
  2 2 to 5 years
  3 5 to 10 years
  4 More than 10 years
  99 I prefer not to answer

D_4 Do you have tenure at your current academic institution?
  1 Yes [Go to D_6]
  2 No 99 I prefer not to answer [Go to D_6]

D_5 Based on your current trajectory, how likely do you think it is that you will successfully obtain tenure?
  1 Very unlikely
  2 Unlikely
  3 Neutral
  4 Likely
  5 Very likely
  99 I prefer not to answer

D_6 Is your primary discipline considered part of the humanities or social sciences?
  1 Humanities
  2 Social Sciences
  3 Both
  4 None of the above
  99 I prefer not to answer

D_7 What is your citizenship status?
  1 Singaporean
  2 Singapore PR
  3 None of the above
  99 I prefer not to answer

D_8 Do you consider yourself part of the majority race in Singapore?
  1 Yes
  2 No
  99 I prefer not to answer

D_9 What is your gender?
  1 Male
  2 Female
  3 Non-binary
  99 I prefer not to answer

D_10 Do you consider your main area of research a politically sensitive one?
  1 Yes
  2 No
  99 I prefer not to answer

D_11 How much of your research is done with international collaborators?
  1 None
  2 A minority
  3 About half
  4 A majority
  5 All
  99 I prefer not to answer

The following questions are taken from international surveys of academic freedom. It will help us benchmark our findings against other countries. Consider the Singapore context as you answer them.

N_1 To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “Universities are communities of scholars preserving, disseminating and expressing freely their opinions on traditional knowledge and culture, and pursuing new knowledge without constriction by prescribed doctrines.”
  1 Strongly agree
  2 Agree
  3 Neutral
  4 Disagree
  5 Strongly disagree
  99 I prefer not to answer

N_2 To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “To meet the needs of the world around it, a university’s teaching and research must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.”
  1 Strongly agree
  2 Agree
  3 Neutral
  4 Disagree
  5 Strongly disagree
  99 I prefer not to answer

N_3 To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “All higher-education teaching personnel should have the right to fulfill their functions without fear of repression by the state or any other source.”
  1 Strongly agree
  2 Agree
  3 Neutral
  4 Disagree
  5 Strongly disagree
  99 I prefer not to answer

S_1 To what extent are scholars free to develop and pursue their own research and teaching agendas without interference?
  0 When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are, across all disciplines, consistently subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.
  1 When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are, in some disciplines, consistently subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.
  2 When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are occasionally subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.
  3 When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are rarely subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.
  4 When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are not subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.
  99 I prefer not to answer

S_2 To what extent are scholars free to exchange and communicate research ideas and findings?
  0 Academic exchange and dissemination is, across all disciplines, consistently subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.
  1 Academic exchange and dissemination is, in some disciplines, consistently subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.
  2 Academic exchange and dissemination is occasionally subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.
  3 Academic exchange and dissemination is rarely subject to censorship, self- censorship, or other restrictions.
  4 Academic exchange and dissemination is not subject to censorship, self- censorship, or other restrictions.
  99 I prefer not to answer
To what extent do universities exercise institutional autonomy in practice?

1. Universities do not exercise any degree of institutional autonomy; non-academic actors control decision-making.
2. Universities exercise only very limited institutional autonomy; non-academic actors interfere extensively with decision-making.
3. Universities exercise some institutional autonomy; non-academic actors interfere moderately with decision-making.
4. Universities exercise institutional autonomy to a large extent; non-academic actors have only rare and minimal influence on decision-making.

S_7 How much of your research requires data or access to sites/respondents controlled by government agencies?

1. None
2. A minority
3. About half
4. A majority
5. All (Go to S_9)

99 I prefer not to answer [Go to S_10]

S_8 [MA] For parts of your research that DO NOT require data or access to sites/respondents controlled by government agencies, this is mainly because (select all that apply):

1. Data sources that are required are already publicly available (i.e., not controlled by the state)
2. I avoid research topics that could entail complications in access, approval, or publication
3. Stipulated conditions for data access are too restrictive or onerous
4. The nature of the research topic does not require such data/access

S_9 [Go to if S_10 if S_7 = “None”]

[M]A For parts of your research that DOES require data or access to sites/respondents controlled by government agencies, this is mainly because (select all that apply):

1. The nature of the research topic requires such data/access
2. Funding requirements (e.g., research grant is from a government agency)
3. Data access from government agencies are the only available resources
4. A conscious choice to use such data/access for my research

S_9_Other Other (please specify:)

99 I prefer not to answer [Exclusive answer]

S_10 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?

1. Never (Go to F_1)
2. Once
3. More than once

99 I prefer not to answer [Go to F_1]

S_11 Were you convinced that the administrative reason given was valid?

1. Yes (Go to F_1)
2. No

99 I prefer not to answer [Go to F_1]

S_12 [MA] Did you think the real reason was (select all that apply):

1. Political/ideological sensitivity
2. Personal differences with someone in authority

S_12_Other Other (please specify:)

99 I prefer not to answer [Exclusive answer]

In this section, we would like to know how much autonomy you feel you have in various aspects of your work and your broader academic life.

S_13 [MA] At what level do you think the decision was made? (select all that apply):

1. MOE or beyond
2. University management
3. Faculty/Department
4. My immediate supervisor

S_13_Other Other (please specify:)

99 I prefer not to answer [Exclusive answer]

F_1 Have you felt free to choose your preferred research area and broad agenda?

1. Yes (Go to F_3)
2. No

99 I prefer not to answer [Go to F_3]

F_2 [MA] If no, what are the constraints on your autonomy? (select all that apply):

1. Explicit signals from my seniors that such research would not be politically welcome.
2. Advice from peers that such research would not be politically welcome.
3. My reading of the political environment.
4. Limitations in the availability of resources and/or data.

F_2_Other Other (please specify:)

99 I prefer not to answer [Exclusive answer]

F_3 Have you felt free to pursue specific research projects?

1. Yes (Go to F_5)
2. No

99 I prefer not to answer [Go to F_5]

F_4 [MA] If no, what are the constraints on your autonomy? (select all that apply):

1. Explicit signals from my seniors that such research would not be politically welcome.
2. Advice from peers that such research would not be politically welcome.
3. My reading of the political environment.
4. Limitations in the availability of resources and/or data.

F_4_Other Other (please specify:)

99 I prefer not to answer [Exclusive answer]

F_5 Have you felt free to shape your syllabi and reading lists as you wish?

1. Yes (Go to F_7)
2. No

99 I prefer not to answer [Go to F_7]
F_6 | If no, what are the constraints on your autonomy? (select all that apply):
F_6a | Explicit signals from my superiors that the content would not be politically welcome.
F_6b | Advice from peers that the content would not be politically welcome.
F_6c | My reading of the political environment.
F_6d | Lack of fit with the programme/department.
F_6e | Other (please specify): [99]

P_2 | Dr Z is a faculty member at a local university who organizes an event that receives negative feedback from senior government officials. The university announces new procedures for vetting such events. Do you think that this is acceptable?
1 | Completely acceptable
2 | Somewhat acceptable
3 | Neither acceptable nor unacceptable
4 | Somewhat unacceptable
5 | Completely unacceptable
99 | I prefer not to answer

P_3 | Dr B is an associate professor at a local university who has written articles that have spurred active debates in broader Singapore society. Dr B is later transferred to other non-research based units where the workload is prohibitive for research productivity. Do you think that this is acceptable?
1 | Completely acceptable
2 | Somewhat acceptable
3 | Neither acceptable nor unacceptable
4 | Somewhat unacceptable
5 | Completely unacceptable
99 | I prefer not to answer

P_4 | In a meeting that includes senior university management and other faculty, Dr C raises an issue that stirs some controversy. Subsequent minutes of the meeting make no mention of the discussion, and senior management do not acknowledge substantive discussion of the issue. There is no further action on the issue. Do you think that this is acceptable?
1 | Completely acceptable
2 | Somewhat acceptable
3 | Neither acceptable nor unacceptable
4 | Somewhat unacceptable
5 | Completely unacceptable
99 | I prefer not to answer

M_1 | Singapore’s higher education industry has become more plural, with several foreign universities setting up colleges, departments and programmes in partnership with Singaporean institutions.

Do you think such partnerships have benefitted academic freedom in Singapore?
1 | Strongly agree
2 | Agree
3 | Neutral
4 | Disagree
5 | Strongly disagree
99 | I prefer not to answer

M_2 | Do you have any other comments about academic freedom in Singapore?

M_3 | Do you have any other comments for the research team?

Next we will outline some (fictional) experiences of other academics. In each case, imagine you are the person described and answer what you think of the situation.

P_1 | Dr X is an assistant professor at a local university whose work has been the subject of public debate. At an annual appraisal meeting, s/he was told by the HOD that going forward, s/he should be "more careful". Do you think that this is acceptable?
1 | Completely acceptable
2 | Somewhat acceptable
3 | Neither acceptable nor unacceptable
4 | Somewhat unacceptable
5 | Completely unacceptable
99 | I prefer not to answer
GPPI Academic Freedom Index

How GPPI’s global study rated Singapore.

The Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute’s Academic Freedom Index (AFI) is based on assessments implemented by V-Dem in Sweden. Independent experts — mostly academics within the countries being assessed — answer standard questionnaires requiring them to rate various indicators of academic freedom. Most liberal democracies have AFIs of above 0.9. Taiwan and South Korea are close to that level, at 0.87 in 2020. Singapore’s hovers at around 0.5. The AFI covers five dimensions of academic freedom. Below are the questions the expert coders answer, and Singapore’s 2020 score on each dimension. The AcademiaSG mean results for the same questions (reported on pages 11–13) are provided for comparison.

**Freedom to research and teach**
To what extent are scholars free to develop and pursue their own research and teaching agendas without interference?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fully free. When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are not subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mostly free. When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are rarely subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moderately restricted. When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are occasionally subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Severely restricted. When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are, in some disciplines, consistently subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Completely restricted. When determining their research agenda or teaching curricula, scholars are, across all disciplines, consistently subject to interference or incentivized to self-censor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fully free. Academic exchange and dissemination is not subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mostly free. Academic exchange and dissemination is rarely subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moderately restricted. Academic exchange and dissemination is occasionally subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Severely restricted. Academic exchange and dissemination is, in some disciplines, consistently subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Completely restricted. Academic exchange and dissemination is, across all disciplines, consistently subject to censorship, self-censorship, or other restrictions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clarification: Free academic exchange includes uncensored access to research material, unhindered participation in national or international academic conferences, and the uncensored publication of academic material. Free dissemination refers to the unrestricted possibility for scholars to share and explain research findings in their field of expertise to non-academic audiences through media engagement or public lectures.
### Institutional autonomy

**To what extent do universities exercise institutional autonomy in practice?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No autonomy at all. Universities do not exercise any degree of institutional autonomy; non-academic actors control decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Minimal autonomy. Universities exercise only very limited institutional autonomy; non-academic actors interfere extensively with decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moderate autonomy. Universities exercise some institutional autonomy; non-academic actors interfere moderately with decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Substantial autonomy. Universities exercise institutional autonomy to a large extent; non-academic actors have only rare and minimal influence on decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Complete autonomy. Universities exercise complete institutional autonomy from non-academic actors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Clarification: Institutional autonomy "means the independence of institutions of higher education from the State and all other forces of society, to make decisions regarding its internal government, finance, administration, and to establish its policies of education, research, extension work and other related activities" (Lima Declaration). Note that institutional autonomy does not preclude universities from accepting state or third party funding, but does require that they remain in charge of all types of decisions listed above. Institutional autonomy does also not preclude a public oversight role by the state over universities’ spending of public funds.*

### Campus integrity

**To what extent are campuses free from politically motivated surveillance or security infringements?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Completely restricted. Campus integrity is fundamentally undermined by extensive surveillance and severe intimidation, including violence or closures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Severely restricted. Campus integrity is to a large extent undermined by surveillance and intimidation, at times including violence or closures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moderately restricted. Campus integrity is challenged by some significant cases of surveillance or intimidation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mostly free. Campus integrity is to a large extent respected, with only minor cases of surveillance or intimidation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fully free. Campus integrity is comprehensively respected; there are no cases of surveillance or intimidation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Clarification: “Campus” refers to all university buildings as well as digital research and teaching platforms. Campus integrity means the preservation of an open learning and research environment marked by an absence of an externally induced climate of insecurity or intimidation on campus. Examples of infringements of campus integrity are politically motivated on-campus or digital surveillance, presence by intelligence or security forces, presence of student militias, or violent attacks by third parties, if specifically targeting universities to repress academic life on campus. Note that we are only interested in politically motivated infringements and targeted attacks on campus integrity, not in non-political security concerns or proportionate security measures taken on campus to address these.*

### Freedom of academic and cultural expression

**Is there academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression related to political issues?**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not respected by public authorities. Censorship and intimidation are frequent. Academic activities and cultural expressions are severely restricted or controlled by the government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Weakly respected by public authorities. Academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression are practiced occasionally, but direct criticism of the government is mostly met with repression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Somewhat respected by public authorities. Academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression are practiced routinely, but strong criticism of the government is sometimes met with repression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mostly respected by public authorities. There are few limitations on academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression, and resulting sanctions tend to be infrequent and soft.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fully respected by public authorities. There are no restrictions on academic freedom or cultural expression.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Clarifications:*
III. Guiding Principles

4. Institutions of higher education, and more particularly universities, are communities of scholars preserving, disseminating and expressing freely their opinions on traditional knowledge and culture, and pursuing new knowledge without constriction by prescribed doctrines. The pursuit of new knowledge and its application lie at the heart of the mandate of such institutions of higher education.

5. Advances in higher education, scholarship and research depend largely on infrastructure and resources, both human and material, and on the qualifications and expertise of higher-education teaching personnel as well as on their human, pedagogical and technical qualities, underpinned by academic freedom, professional responsibility, collegiality and institutional autonomy.

6. Teaching in higher education is a profession: it is a form of public service that requires of higher education personnel expert knowledge and specialized skills acquired and maintained through rigorous and lifelong study and research; it also calls for a sense of personal and institutional responsibility for the education and welfare of students and of the community at large and for a commitment to high professional standards in scholarship and research.

V. Institutional rights, duties and responsibilities

A. Institutional autonomy

17. The proper enjoyment of academic freedom and compliance with the duties and responsibilities listed below require the autonomy of institutions of higher education. Autonomy is that degree of self-governance necessary for effective decision making by institutions of higher education regarding their academic work, standards, management and related activities consistent with systems of public accountability, especially in respect of funding provided by the state, and respect for academic freedom and human rights.

B. Institutional accountability

22. In view of the substantial financial investments made, Member States and higher education institutions should ensure a proper balance between the level of autonomy enjoyed by higher education institutions and their systems of accountability. Higher education institutions should endeavour to open their governance in order to be accountable. They should be accountable for:

(b) a commitment to quality and excellence in their teaching, scholarship and research functions, and an obligation to protect and ensure the integrity of their teaching, scholarship and research against intrusions inconsistent with their academic missions;

(h) ensuring that higher education personnel are not impeded in their work in the classroom or in their research capacity by violence, intimidation or harassment;

(m) ensuring that they address themselves to the contemporary problems facing society;

(o) ensuring up-to-date libraries and access, without censorship, to modern teaching, research and information resources providing information required by higher-education teaching personnel or by students for teaching, scholarship or research;

(q) ensuring that when engaged in classified research it will not contradict the educational mission and objectives of the institutions and will not run counter to the general objectives of peace, human rights, sustainable development and environment.

VI. Rights and freedoms of higher-education teaching personnel

A. Individual rights and freedoms

25. Access to the higher education academic profession should be based solely on appropriate academic qualifications, competence and experience and be equal for all members of society without any discrimination.

26. Higher-education teaching personnel, like all other groups and individuals, should enjoy those internationally recognized civil, political, social
and cultural rights applicable to all citizens.

27. The maintaining of the above international standards should be upheld in the interest of higher education internationally and within the country. To do so, the principle of academic freedom should be scrupulously observed. Higher-education teaching personnel are entitled to the maintaining of academic freedom, that is to say, the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies. All higher-education teaching personnel should have the right to fulfil their functions without discrimination of any kind and without fear of repression by the state or any other source. Higher-education teaching personnel can effectively do justice to this principle if the environment in which they operate is conducive, which requires a democratic atmosphere; hence the challenge for all of developing a democratic society.

28. Higher-education teaching personnel have the right to teach without any interference, subject to accepted professional principles including professional responsibility and intellectual rigour with regard to standards and methods of teaching. Higher-education teaching personnel should not be forced to instruct against their own best knowledge and conscience or be forced to use curricula and methods contrary to national and international human rights standards. Higher education teaching personnel should play a significant role in determining the curriculum.

29. Higher-education teaching personnel have a right to carry out research work without any interference, or any suppression, in accordance with their professional responsibility and subject to nationally and internationally recognized professional principles of intellectual rigour, scientific inquiry and research ethics. They should also have the right to publish and communicate the conclusions of the research of which they are authors or co-authors.

30. Higher-education teaching personnel have a right to undertake professional activities outside of their employment, particularly those that enhance their professional skills or allow for the application of knowledge to the problems of the community, provided such activities do not interfere with their primary commitments to their home institutions in accordance with institutional policies and regulations or national laws and practice where they exist.

B. Self-governance and collegiality

31. Higher-education teaching personnel should have the right and opportunity, without discrimination of any kind, according to their abilities, to take part in the governing bodies and to criticize the functioning of higher education institutions, including their own, while respecting the right of other sections of the academic community to participate, and they should also have the right to elect a majority of representatives to academic bodies within the higher education institution.

32. The principles of collegiality include academic freedom, shared responsibility, the policy of participation of all concerned in internal decision making structures and practices, and the development of consultative mechanisms.

VII. Duties and responsibilities of higher education teaching personnel

33. Higher-education teaching personnel should recognize that the exercise of rights carries with it special duties and responsibilities, including the obligation to respect the academic freedom of other members of the academic community and to ensure the fair discussion of contrary views. Academic freedom carries with it the duty to use that freedom in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base research on an honest search for truth.

34. In particular, the individual duties of higher education teaching personnel inherent in their academic freedom are:

(a) to teach students effectively within the means provided by the institution and the state, to be fair and equitable to male and female students and treat those of all races and religions, as well as those with disabilities, equally, to encourage the free exchange of ideas between themselves and their students, and to be available to them for guidance in their studies;

(b) to conduct scholarly research and to disseminate the results of such research or, where original research is not required, to maintain and develop their knowledge of their subject through study and research, and through the development of teaching methodology to improve their pedagogical skills;

(c) to base their research and scholarship on an honest search for knowledge with due respect for evidence, impartial reasoning and honesty in reporting;

(g) to ensure that research is conducted according to the laws and regulations of the state in which the research is carried out, that it does not violate international codes of human rights, and that the
results of the research and the data on which it is based are effectively made available to scholars and researchers in the host institution, except where this might place respondents in peril or where anonymity has been guaranteed;

(k) to be conscious of a responsibility, when speaking or writing outside scholarly channels on matters which are not related to their professional expertise, to avoid misleading the public on the nature of their professional expertise;

(l) to undertake such appropriate duties as are required for the collegial governance of institutions of higher education and of professional bodies.

Magna Charta Universitatum 2020

Originally formulated in 1988, the declaration identifies responsibilities and commitments of the global academy.

Universities acknowledge that they have a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world and to the communities they serve, to benefit humanity and contribute to sustainability.

Intellectual and moral autonomy is the hallmark of any university and a precondition for the fulfilment of its responsibilities to society. That independence needs to be recognised and protected by governments and society at large, and defended vigorously by institutions themselves.

To fulfil their potential, universities require a reliable social contract with civil society, one which supports pursuit of the highest possible quality of academic work, with full respect for institutional autonomy.

As they create and disseminate knowledge, universities question dogmas and established doctrines and encourage critical thinking in all students and scholars.

Academic freedom is their lifeblood; open enquiry and dialogue their nourishment. Universities embrace their duty to teach and undertake research ethically and with integrity, producing reliable, trustworthy and accessible results.

Universities have a civic role and responsibility. They are part of global, collegial networks of scientific enquiry and scholarship, building on shared bodies of knowledge and contributing to their further development. They also are embedded in local cultures and crucially relevant to their future and enrichment. While they are immersed in and connected with global developments, they engage fully with and assume leading roles in local communities and ecosystems.

Universities are non-discriminatory spaces of tolerance and respect where diversity of perspectives flourishes and where inclusivity, anchored in principles of equity and fairness, prevails. They therefore commit themselves to advance equity and fairness in all aspects of academic life including admissions, hiring and promotion practices.

Education is a human right, a public good, and should be available to all. Universities recognise that learning is a lifelong activity with tertiary education as one part of a continuum. Within that one part, universities serve diverse learners at all stages of their lives.

Universities acknowledge that individuals and communities, often due to inequitable circumstances, have difficulty gaining access to higher education or influencing the modes and matter of academic study. To realise human potential everywhere, universities deliberately seek ways to welcome and engage with diverse voices and perspectives.

By signing the Magna Charta Universitatum 2020 universities declare their commitment to the original declaration and to upholding and advancing the Principles, Values and Responsibilities stated above, to strengthen the role of universities in the preservation of the planet and promoting health, prosperity, and enlightenment around the world.

– Signed by more than 900 universities in 88 countries.