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Academic interests

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Academic interests

Our universities have arrived globally, but left the local behind.

Singapore's two main public universities have risen in global reputation, lifted by the state's economic might. For most Singaporeans as well as many of the region's brightest, getting a place to study at the National University of Singapore or Nanyang Technological University is a proud accomplishment. In several fields, our universities have become research powerhouses, worthy of mention alongside traditional brand names of the West.

But NUS and NTU suffer from a stuntedness in their development—an imbalance akin to the malaise of the Singapore press. Our media's foreign content impresses even Western journalists, but their local coverage is reminiscent of communist party mouthpieces, or so mainland Chinese journalists tell me. Similarly, even as Singapore universities rise in global rankings, their contribution to the country's intellectual life is relatively modest. Particularly in the humanities and the social sciences, they are largely absent precisely when their expertise is most needed—when complex and controversial issues call for the kind of clarity, context and research-based insight that we academics claim

to be able to provide. This retreat from the public sphere has been so complete and enduring that it is no longer noticed. It doesn't occur to most Singaporeans that our universities could be playing a much broader social role.

I hasten to clarify that we shouldn't expect university departments to replicate think tanks, which are meant to insert themselves directly into current policy debates. Given how news cycles are getting more and more compressed, and how controversies explode and fizzle out within a week, it would be a mistake for academics to flit about reacting to every matter that grabs people's attention. That shouldn't be the responsibility of serious scholars.

But a strong university department or scholarly association should be visible in major public debates that are relevant to its field. At the very least, universities should be able to serve as an honest broker, convening discussions on challenging topics. After all, they are the only institutions in our society that give their employees the time and resources—largely taxpayer-funded—to think differently. They are not pressed to arrive at policy positions. They are not required to be popular or profitable. They can examine problems deeply, challenge conventional wisdom, clarify issues, offer insights that are counter-intuitive and keep contrarian viewpoints bubbling on the backburner for future reference. One might even say they have a moral responsibility to do all this.

Singapore's two public universities have very active calendars, but their activities focus on non-Singaporean matters. While many other universities are seeking desperately to internationalise and not get too parochial, ours have the opposite problem. Singapore has already emerged as one of the top centres of learning for anyone interested in Asia; it is academia's contribution to Singapore's own intellectual and cultural life that is lacking. Consider, for example, the government's proposal to amend the Constitution to reserve presidential elections periodically for minority candidates. There were individual academics interested enough to make submissions to the Constitutional Commission. But, the activity fell far short of

what would be considered normal elsewhere, perhaps for want of a critical mass of such scholars. In a different setting, universities would have been falling over themselves to convene public events to discuss such a major move before the parliamentary vote. Legal scholars and political scientists would explore constitutional implications and issues concerning political representation. Sociologists might want to showcase their research into ethnic identity and politics. For anthropologists, this could be an opportunity to share their research on the construction of the Malay race. In a normal developed country, local universities might run a series of public seminars on such subjects. Not in Singapore.

Some Singaporeans may feel there is nothing wrong with universities staying focussed on teaching enrolled, fee-paying students without the distractions of public outreach. But one can't really compartmentalise a university's mission this way. Universities have to fertilise the soil they depend on. Just as our national orchestras give free concerts at the Botanic Gardens to help cultivate an appreciation for music, research universities need to be out there showing the public that their intellectual work is worth supporting. Furthermore, schooling that's confined to textbooks and classroom learning, by professors who show no interest in the real world passing by their window, wouldn't amount to much of an education.

The lack of engagement in the local can compromise universities' ability to mount even basic Singapore-related courses. Our universities do have a Singapore Studies requirement in their undergraduate curricula, but departments often find it a struggle to mount relevant courses, sometimes relying on adjuncts or faculty borrowed from other departments. When I worked at NTU's communication school, I taught a freshman course called Media in Singapore, introducing all communication majors to our media industries and their political, economic and cultural contexts. Since the school's founding, this course or earlier iterations of it had been considered important enough to be listed as a compulsory module. But when I left, the school didn't consider it a priority to find a

replacement teacher. It simply dropped Media in Singapore. It was revived after a year—but no longer as a core requirement; it became an elective. Years earlier, I'd proposed the school be renamed after our late president and former journalist Wee Kim Wee. I was delighted when this happened, because I thought it would put our Singaporean identity and public service mission front and centre. But it turns out it takes more than a name to Singaporeanise an institution.

The most disappointing case of going regional and global at the expense of the local must be political science at NUS. I've followed public forums on local politics for decades. In recent years, one thing that has become practically guaranteed is that none of the speakers on Singapore politics will come from the NUS department of political science. To understand why, visit the department's website and look at the faculty's self-declared research interests. Most define their scope geographically: America, China, East Asia, Southeast Asia are all covered. The one place name that doesn't appear is Singapore. As I write this in mid-2017, not a single faculty member at NUS political science claims an expertise in domestic politics. You have to go back to Chan Heng Chee in the 1980s to find one who has made a seminal contribution to our understanding of Singapore politics. It's a situation that would be unthinkable in virtually all developed countries.

Political science is an extreme but not unique case. In some of our university departments, such as economics at NUS, if you scanned the research interests and backgrounds of its faculty, you'd have a hard time guessing which country or even region it belonged to. Based on faculty profiles alone you might think the department was based in Greater China, or perhaps in an American university with an Asia-Pacific focus. The problem is less serious in sociology, but quite stark in economics and history as well as in political science. NTU's history department website suggests that just one out of 18 faculty members is a historian of Singapore. The history department at NUS is more illustrious, but is also short on local expertise. Consider the books that have been published on

Singapore history. The National Library has compiled a useful bibliography. Of the 27 recommended titles covering Singapore's history up to 1964, just one is (co-)authored by a current faculty member of the NUS history department.

None of this will hurt our universities' global rankings. Ranking agencies don't really scrutinise a university's local relevance, because it probably hasn't occurred to them that universities might not be local enough. They instead reward the opposite, internationalisation, which most universities have trouble with, but in which Singapore institutions are star performers.



There are two fairly obvious reasons for our universities' C-minus performance in Singapore studies: the lack of academic freedom, and the absence of a Singaporean core in many departments. Political restrictions date back to the first decade and a half of independent Singapore, when the government cracked down on activism in the University of Singapore and Nanyang University. From the ashes, the new NUS and NTU rose like phoenixes—with a permanent phobia of the fires of politics (Chapter 17).

In many fields, academics are also thwarted by a lack of access to government data. For this reason, one can hardly blame economists for choosing not to specialise in Singapore. Historians have a different problem. They know too much. Their access to declassified British records gives them a rich vein of evidence to mine about Singapore's pre-independence history—but this also puts them on a collision course with the government's official narrative. Sadly, this has meant that young academic historians of Singapore are able to find work more easily outside the country than in our own universities (Chapter 13).

It would be simplistic, though, to blame only the government for any de-Singaporeanisation of Singapore's campuses. The universities' problems are partly self-inflicted, an own-goal scored by administrators obsessed by the research productivity game. This

game rewards those that churn out papers in so-called top-tier journals, ignoring the fact that these journals are published in, by and for the West. To illustrate how this bias works in practice, consider an American political scientist writing a 6,000-word article about voting patterns in Ohio. He can quickly get to the heart of his findings and theoretical contributions. In contrast, a scholar researching Singapore elections would have to spend half her paper justifying why Singapore is worth studying, then explaining the local context in painstaking detail for an audience of mystified journal editors, before she's finally able to discuss her actual study. The problem is compounded by the fact that the off-the-shelf theoretical frameworks currently in circulation were mostly developed in the US and Europe and may not fit Singapore. It's therefore much harder for scholars working on Singapore to sail on the main theoretical currents in their fields.

This bias results from the uneven distribution of power in global academia. America and its concerns lie at the core of most disciplines; the rest of the world is peripheral. It is a frustration familiar not only to scholars of Singapore, but also to academics in Australia, Britain, Hong Kong and elsewhere. In these other societies, however, universities put up stiffer resistance to the imposition of key performance indicators that would undermine their core mission to study their own locales. Top-tier journal publication is still prized—but not at the expense of neglecting impactful local research or teaching needs. Our universities could do the same, prioritising Singapore-focussed research even if it is likely to generate lower citation scores. Bibliometrics are not ends in themselves, but merely crude proxy measures for research impact. Our university leaders and education policymakers are free to adopt different yardsticks. As things stand, the metrics don't encourage research into our own milieu. Furthermore, it is an open secret that, in many departments, hiring and promotion decisions focus more on a candidate's research numbers than on what he or she is able to teach—hence the problem of not having enough faculty to teach Singapore content well.

Responding to these market signals, many locals and almost all foreigners decide to focus on regional or international topics, or purely abstract theoretical work that is not grounded in any particular context. There are still scholars who, despite the disincentives, persist and study their first love—Singapore. But in many social science and humanities fields, they lack clout. The situation suits the majority of foreign faculty who now dominate departments—and in many cases run them. Singapore is the only place in the world where foreigners can work at a top-ranked university without feeling any shame that they know nothing about their host society; where, indeed, such ignorance is often more of an asset than a liability. This is the unaccounted cost of our universities' success at going global: an abstraction from the local that has left Singapore understudied and intellectually impoverished.

I don't mean to suggest that foreign faculty as such are a problem. It's simplistic to equate local origins with local commitment. Some foreigners have had a transformative impact on Singapore studies. Archaeologist John Miksic is a prominent example. Others have been conscientious institution builders for Singapore. I personally benefitted from the mentorship of two such giants, Taiwan-born sociologist Eddie Kuo, the founding dean of NTU's communication school, and historian Anthony Reid from New Zealand, founding director of the Asia Research Institute at NUS. Philip Holden, a professor of English at NUS, is another model foreign-born scholar. He became a respected authority on the Singapore literary scene. But after more than twenty years, he began facing problems maintaining his permanent resident status; his application for citizenship was denied. He and his Singaporean wife decided to relocate to Canada. Hearing this sad news, a former student who became an English teacher commented on his Facebook wall, "Without you, a generation of Singaporeans wouldn't have known what SingLit was, and SingLit would be nowhere near what it is today."

Whatever the mix of reasons for the lack of emphasis on

Singapore-focussed work, the overall pattern is striking. Through indifference or by design, it amounts to a marginalisation of things Singaporean. The new Social Science Research Council is trying to come to the rescue with substantial funds earmarked for research relevant to Singapore, but then again, the problem has never been money. Grants alone won't counterbalance the factors weighing against independent research on Singapore society, especially if, as with arts funding, the Council denies taxpayer money to projects that are seen as critical of the government.

The university has a role that goes beyond equipping and credentialing students for employment; beyond serving the needs of industry; and beyond developing its city's pulling power as an educational and research hub—all great strengths of NUS and NTU. It also has a civilising mission, to show how the pursuit of knowledge and reasoned deliberation are the best ways for a society to manage its contemporary and future challenges. This can only be achieved if a university is engaged with the society of which it is part. And this is where Singapore's institutions of higher learning should do much more to live up to their stratospheric global rankings.