**Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education**

We are an independent collective of Singaporean academics who have been working on academic freedom issues in our country since 2019. We welcome the call for inputs to the Special Rapporteur’s report to the Human Rights Council. This submission relates to the autonomy of higher education institutions and the independence of academics.

Major, alarming attacks on academics and universities around the world will rightly command the attention of human rights monitors. However, we ask that the Special Rapporteur not overlook subtler, stealthier ways in which academia is co-opted and captured by power. These may occur without the arrests, direct censorship, government takeovers, or physical attacks that make news headlines. Instead, they often involve substantial carrots alongside sticks, such that these politically compromising relationships with people in power are welcomed by universities that seek the state’s resources and patronage. Strong backing by the state can result in universities excelling in global rankings, notwithstanding their lack of commitment to academic freedom.

Such dynamics can result in a curious situation where the state suppresses academic freedom with the apparent support of the academic establishment. University administrators internalise the state’s political sensitivities, and devise internal control structures and incentive systems accordingly, to induce their staff to work within politically constrained parameters. The net result is a system that operates mostly through hidden self-censorship.

Lack of explicit opposition from universities should not be the end of the matter. We need to remember that academic freedom (like media freedom) is not a right owned by that industry for its own benefit. It belongs to the wider society, who have a right to be informed and educated to the best of their country’s ability, without unwarranted interference by political actors. In jurisdictions where high-performing universities co-exist with tight restrictions on academic freedom, we invariably find a stark imbalance in performance: these universities may do well on measures that matter to the global higher education industry such as citations and internationalisation, while under-serving their own societies’ need for independent, critical teaching and scholarship.

Singapore is one such case, though not the only one. For a more in-depth analysis, we append two of our recent studies. The first is a survey report that reveals the extent of restrictions that have been entrenched within Singapore’s universities. The second is a book chapter that explains the situation in greater historical and political detail. One unexpected finding is that women faculty (even after controlling for tenure status) are more likely to feel constrained than male faculty, suggesting that (even in a society known for relatively high levels of gender equality), restrictions on academic freedom burden women disproportionately.

We hope that our submission will help the Special Rapporteur produce a report that is reflective of some of the complexities of academic freedom in the 21st century.

*January 2024*

**Appendices**

AcademiaSG (2021). *Academic Freedom in Singapore: Survey Report*. Singapore: AcademiaSG. Available at SSRN: [https://ssrn.com/abstract=3905623](https://ssrn.com/abstract%3D3905623)

George, C., J. I. Chong and S. Ang. (2022). “The State of Academic Freedom in Singapore’s World-Beating Universities” in D. Gueorguiev (ed.), New Threats to Academic Freedom in Asia. Columbia University Press. <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Chapter-Three-George-Chong-Ang.pdf>