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censorship amid academic 'excellence': internalised, targeted, and performative

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The article explores the complex terrain of contemporary academic freedom, drawing on the author's personal experiences of censorship in Singapore as well as global studies on freedom of expression. It argues that although archetypal state censorship – external, visible, and coercive – remains a feature of higher education, many restrictions are indirect and institutionalised within university bureaucracies. They tend to be highly targeted, such that only a minority of scholars working on sensitive topics are directly affected. Universities are therefore able to practise censorship even as they pursue excellence, at least as measured by the higher education industry and global ranking agencies. Another common feature of academic censorship is its performative purpose. Often, it is less about removing ideas from circulation than an opportunity for university administrators to signal their compliance with government leaders and other powerful actors.

Keywords: academic freedom, higher education, self-censorship, university rankings

Much of my knowledge about censorship in education has been gathered through involuntary participant observation. I have been immersed in multiple situations of being silenced by power. As a researcher of freedom of expression and its limits, I might even consider my recurring role as a censorship guinea pig – albeit never with my informed consent – a blessing.

My lived experience includes being targeted for archetypal, direct state censorship. For example, in 2021, the government of my country, Singapore, blocked the distribution and sale of my book, *Red Lines: Political Cartoons and the Struggle Against Censorship* (MIT Press). The book was a double-finalist in the Association of American Publishers' PROSE Awards. Unimpressed, the government banned it under the Undesirable Publications Act for reproducing cartoons deemed offensive to various religions (Serrano, 2023).

Much less visible but more routine – and, therefore, what I'll focus on in this essay – are political restrictions imposed by non-state gatekeepers within the academy. For example, in the past decade, I've received three separate invitations from faculty and students to speak at the National University of Singapore (NUS), only to find the events shelved or cancelled by NUS senior management because of my reputation as a critic of the government (George, 2024a).

This is the shadowy world of institutional self-censorship, which receives insufficient attention partly because libertarian and legal censorship radars (Ahmed, 2015) tend to be tuned only to state actions. Many restrictions on academics do not arrive unmediated from outside but are mostly *internalised* within university bureaucracies. Contemporary speech restrictions have two other common but underacknowledged features that I'll discuss. One is that they tend to be *targeted* rather

than total, allowing most academics to go about their business unhindered. This helps explain how Singapore and China, both in the bottom half of academic freedom rankings, have been able to nurture internationally-competitive universities.

Academic censorship also has a *performative* dimension. A campus speech controversy may ostensibly be over whether some speech should be permitted. But I'll suggest that opposing sides' demands may be more performative than literal: they want universities to make a public show of applying their symbolic weight in their favour, within some much larger and on-going cultural or political contest. In highly polarised environments, whether in authoritarian settings or liberal democracies, this can make universities' judgment calls impossibly complex.

A Human Rights Take on Academic Freedom

Before elaborating on these three points, I should clarify how I use the key terms, academic freedom and censorship, since they mean different things to different people. My research is normatively grounded in principles found in international human rights law. The United Nations' core human rights treaty, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), has been signed by most countries. Although compliance is another matter altogether, seven decades of discussions around it have generated arguably the closest thing we have to a set of global norms to help people think through complex questions concerning freedom of expression.

Applying ICCPR principles, the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to education describes academic freedom as a human right comprising:

> the freedom of individuals to access, disseminate and produce information, to think freely and to develop, express, apply and engage with a diversity of knowledge within or related to their fields of expertise or of study, whether inside… or outside the academic community. (Shaheed, 2024, p. 1)

Importantly, a human rights perspective sees higher education as a social good and universities as having a public service role (UNESCO, 1997). The Magna Charta Universitatum (MCU Observatory, 2020) signed by more than a thousand universities in almost a hundred countries, acknowledges their "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". That role requires universities to "question dogmas and established doctrines and encourage critical thinking in all students and scholars". To borrow from a formulation of press freedom, we could say that academia needs freedom *from* power so that it has the freedom *to* serve society.

Just like freedom of expression, academic freedom is not an absolute right but one that is subject to certain duties and responsibilities (Shaheed, 2024). Others have rights too, so restrictions that protect various recognised rights of others could amount to "good" censorship. Furthermore, academic freedom while related to individual freedom of expression is not coterminous with it (Scott, 2017; Simpson, 2020). Academics are bound by the norms of their scholarly communities, including highly demanding and restrictive peer review processes and guidelines on research ethics. Duties inherent in one's academic freedom include "to base their research and scholarship on an honest search for knowledge with due respect for evidence, impartial reasoning and honesty in reporting" (UNESCO, 1997, p. 12). Academic communities can also legitimately set rules for

student activities and campus speech, again to protect others' rights.

Such permissible limitations on free speech do not give those in power carte blanche. Human rights doctrine requires any restriction to satisfy the so-called three-part test of legality, legitimacy, and necessity. First, restrictions must be predictable and not arbitrary, which means they must be spelled out clearly in advance. Second, they must also serve a narrow set of purposes specified in the ICCPR, such as to protect the rights of others. Third, the restriction must be a necessary and proportionate means of achieving the social objective. Freedom of expression, or academic freedom, is a hollow right if restrictions become the norm instead of the exception, or if rules are so subjective and punishments so disproportionate that they chill potentially valuable speech. It is presumed that restrictions are formulated and applied fairly through democratic processes accountable to the community.

Human rights laws and norms are not a formula that provides definitive answers in every case where speech is restricted. The need to balance rights and consider context often requires deliberation and impartial judgment when assessing the possible harms and benefits of speech. But this does not mean all situations are subjective, forcing us to choose either the libertarian option of erring on the side of untrammelled freedom or the autocrat's preferred argument, that since nobody can agree, somebody (namely, he) will decide.

The existence of grey areas notwithstanding, there are many practical situations where restrictions on academic freedom quite clearly violate human rights norms: for example, when scholarship is suppressed even if it passes peer review and mainly because it makes power holders uncomfortable; or when campus activities are subject to arbitrary restrictions by university presidents responding to trustees and donors without consulting deans, senates, and student unions; or when a staff member is fired or student deported for speech that offends, without due process.

As for censorship, human rights discourse tends to use the term in a pejorative sense – as a shorthand for problematic restrictions on protected speech – even as it accepts that state prohibitions in limited circumstances are allowable (or even required, in the case of incitement of hate-related harms). Within a human rights framework, the idea that censorship could serve the public interest is uncontroversial. Whether it is justified or even recommended depends largely on why and how it's done, as the three-part test encapsulates.

What's more germane to this essay is *who* does it. There are champions of free speech who believe free speech belongs to those who own the means of communication, such as internet platform companies, media organisations, and universities. From this perspective, states are the only censor worthy of the name; institutional censorship is an oxymoron because an organisation should have the freedom to decide what can and cannot be said through what it owns.

Most censorship scholars today apply a broader perspective on the sources of censorship. I, like others, think of censorship as any intervention by power – at whatever level – that blocks or distorts people's voluntary exchange of information and ideas (George & Liew, 2021; Jansen, 1991). Power manifests in various guises and interferes in various ways. In addition to traditional state censorship, therefore, censorship scholars work with categories such as *market censorship* to account for how commercial forces impact the allocation of media resources (Pickard, 2021), *proxy censorship* to describe the role of book publishers (Kuper, 1975) and internet platforms (Kreimer, 2006), and *self-censorship* to capture actions taken by producers in anticipation of punishment or reward from

power holders (Lee, 1998). While perhaps fuzzy around the edges, such conceptualisations of censorship are truer to the diverse lived experiences of producers of culture and knowledge (Freshwater, 2004).

This broader understanding of freedom and restrictions is also recommended by the human rights framework. The ICCPR upholds *everyone*'s right to *receive* information and ideas. This, first, turns freedom of expression (and by implication academic freedom) into a positive right, unlike a literal and narrow reading of the United States First Amendment, which refers to freedom of speech and of the press in negative terms ("Congress shall make no law"). The ICCPR's framing implies a positive obligation to provide people with the infrastructures and policies they need to fulfil their free speech rights (Kenyon, 2020). Second, the ICCPR makes clear that this is a right belonging to everyone, not just the "symbolic capitalists" (al-Gharbi, 2024) who generate information and ideas or their employers, but the whole society.

In this reading, academic freedom is not about keeping universities or their members content. It is measured against the university's higher social purpose; problematic censorship would include constraints – no matter the source – that prevent the university from serving the social good. Applying these abstract principles in the real world is of course a highly contentious and imprecise affair, not least because of competing visions of the public interest. But that in itself is no reason to bracket out normative considerations when we attempt a deep dive into a subject like censorship in education.

Institutionalised Controls

Popular conceptions of censorship have been shaped by the world's experience of totalitarian rule and the evocative fictional works that it inspired, such as George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The censor appears in our collective memory as overt and visible in the form of a dictatorial state, absolute in his prohibitions, literal in his commands, and brutal in his exercise of power. Direct and coercive state repression of academia has not disappeared, of course. As I write this, Amnesty International is circulating an alert that the authorities in Azerbaijan have used fabricated charges and unfair trials to neutralise doctoral candidate and peace activist Bahruz Samadov with a 15-year jail term, while academic Igbal Abilov received an 18-year sentence for his work on ethnic minority issues.

But, precisely because this style of repression is more salient, it can backfire (Jansen & Martin, 2015). Knowing this, many authoritarian states tend to prefer subtler and less direct modes of censorship (Guriev & Treisman, 2022; George, 2007). Governments may occasionally want to advertise their power through a spectacular show of violence, but smart authoritarian states know better than to rule entirely by fear (Arendt, 1970). Bunn (2015) goes so far as to say that creating a structure that induces hidden self-censorship is the ultimate goal of the state censor – direct censorship may reflect a failure to locate its preferred back-door access.

In the higher education sector, a government could try to capture or co-opt top positions in universities, to which it can then outsource the job of taming campuses. Such intervention has been made much easier by limited levels of internal democracy within most universities. Many studies point to how the university sector around the world has been corporatised and neoliberalised, creating a powerful managerial class within universities that audits academic performance through productivity-oriented metrics at the expense of the social value and emancipatory potential of

scholarly work (Morrish, 2020).

This is a global trend. What differs is the type of external pressure that is brought to bear on universities. In liberal democracies, the main threat may not be the government but private corporations and other wealthy funders; university managements may sacrifice their faculty's and students' freedoms to curry favour with assorted financial backers (Alibašić et al., 2024; Bonnell, 2021). Just as the study of press freedom would be bereft without due attention to the corporate structures through which most journalism is practised, taking academic freedom seriously requires grasping the political economy of higher education as an industry.

A key pillar of academic freedom is said to be institutional autonomy – the extent to which a university can govern its own affairs (Kinzelbach et al., 2025). However, the university is not a monolithic entity. Therefore, within a formally autonomous university, administrators can suppress the academic freedom of those over whom they have power in ways that go beyond what's required for the institution to stay true to its stated values and norms of academic rigour and public service and instead pander to power (Habib et al., 2008).

Academics in authoritarian societies are accustomed to internalised political censorship. In Singapore, state-funded universities are officially called Autonomous Universities to reflect the fact that their managements are given substantial room to pursue excellence and compete with the world's leading universities for top research faculty and students. But universities remain highly porous to government pressure (George et al., 2022). In a survey of Singapore-based academics I conducted with colleagues (AcademiaSG, 2021), more than 75 percent said universities enjoyed at most "some" institutional autonomy from non-academic actors who interfere with decision-making. But while the government is a looming presence, academics say many of the unjustified restrictions they feel are decided within their institution. Respondents who knew of cases where scholars were asked to modify or withdraw research findings for non-academic reasons tended to think that the decision was made at the level of university leaders.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that university managements take ownership of the government's political priorities, which should not be any surprise given political leaders' dominant role over higher education policy, including the appointment of university presidents and even deans of politically sensitive schools. When scholarly interests come into conflict with political considerations, universities develop bureaucratic fixes to manage the contradictions, usually at the expense of academic freedom. In 2023, a Philippine academic encountered the same treatment that I had been subject to: Sol Iglesias was invited to speak at an NUS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences conference – and was then uninvited. The organiser confided to her that it was probably because she was married to a prominent Singaporean dissident-scholar (Dixon, 2023). The case was widely reported, with both local and foreign media mostly framing it as an embarrassing symptom of Singapore's lack of academic freedom.

A year later, NUS announced a new requirement for FASS events involving outside speakers (Sharma, 2025). Management's response to the Sol Iglesias debacle was not to guarantee non-interference in academics' research activities. Instead, it found a way to pre-empt controversy by moving its checks upstream. It now requires any FASS faculty member intending to organise an event to exercise due diligence and submit a risk assessment form before inviting guest speakers. The host must declare whether these individuals or their topics are likely to be "controversial" or "sensitive". Faculty are advised to check their proposed guests' social media activity. Based on this

political risk assessment, the proposed event will be vetted at the appropriate level – by top management if need be. Quite logically, NUS has decided that embarrassing disinvitations can be avoided by ensuring that the wrong people are not invited in the first place. It was a triumph for managerialism.

As the Iglesias case was exceptional only for its publicness, the AcademiaSG survey a few years earlier had presented a very similar hypothetical but realistic scenario to respondents. What if, we asked, a faculty member organises an event that receives negative feedback from government, and the university then announces new procedures for vetting such events? Half the respondents said this would be "completely unacceptable"; another quarter called it "somewhat unacceptable". In answer to other questions, 90 percent of respondents agreed that, to meet society's needs, universities' teaching and research must be independent of political and economic power. Clearly, there is a major difference in perspective between rank-and-file academics and their university administrators. Whether faculty's opinions are reflected in university policies depends on the institution's internal democracy, which tends to be highly limited.

The institutionalisation of political censorship has also been observed in other electoral autocracies. In India's processes of democratic decline and autocratisation, the state's strategy for taming universities includes capturing the leaderships of public universities and research bodies (Sundar, 2026). Turkey's university sector has suffered similar institutional capture by the state (Can & Kaya, 2025). Even in China's closed autocracy, an all-powerful state outsources routine political management to university managements (Pringle & Woodman, 2022).

Hong Kong, where I have been working for 12 years, has experienced a dramatic decline in political and civic freedoms. While I have not personally experienced here the kinds of intervention I have grown used to in Singapore, academics in the territory hear of faculty hiring and academic activities being blocked for apparently political reasons. Again, most of these are presented as independent decisions taken by university administrators.

While authoritarian societies seem to have had a head start in the internalisation of dubious academic censorship, it is now clear that liberal democracies are not immune. Scholars have tracked how corporatisation of universities compromises scholarly inquiry and campus freedoms in Australia (Swannie, 2022), Britain (O'Regan & Gray, 2018), the United States (Whittington, 2021), and elsewhere. Since the campus protests over Gaza, it has become obvious that no discussion of censorship in education would be complete without scrutiny of the role of university administrators in disciplining academic expression and student activism. No doubt, university leaders had to perform tricky balancing acts between competing rights – to teach, to protest, to be free of intimidation, and so on – and many apparently tried to make good-faith efforts in an exceptionally polarising situation. But it was clear that the decisions taken in some universities (Columbia is one exhaustively documented example) were heavily influenced by political and economic pressures (Sinnar, 2025; Kaufman-Osborn, 2025) that were at odds with ideals of promoting social conciliation, which campus communities desperately needed and are, in theory, uniquely equipped for.

Targeted Restrictions

Conventional liberal wisdom says that a tight censorship regime is incompatible with ambitions to become a research and education hub. Paradoxically, though, lists of the world's top 100 universities

include several from Singapore, Hong Kong, and mainland China – places that are far from being liberal democracies. More than a decade of censorship research tells us that authoritarian states square the circle by targeting their restrictions narrowly (Corduneanu-Huci & Hamilton, 2018; King et al., 2013). Activities that do not threaten power holders are not just allowed but also handsomely rewarded if they are in line with national priorities.

Accordingly, in the AcademiaSG survey, academics were more likely to report feeling constrained if their work was politically sensitive. But less than half (40 percent) placed their own research in this category. Since the survey excluded STEM academics – it was sent to those in the humanities, social sciences, law and business – we can assume that a large majority of academics in Singapore universities feel they face little risk of crossing red lines. Therefore, while Singapore academics are aware of their illiberal environment, it does not hurt most of them directly.

Scholarship that critiques power is a social good (Shaheed, 2024), but its costs are borne by a small group of producers. This is what many authoritarian states have learnt: although there are few checks and balances restraining them, targeted censorship and calibrated coercion are in the long run far more effective than absolutist, totalitarian terror. In Singapore, the authorities even tolerate highly critical research if it is presented solely in arcane form within academic conferences and journals. It is when scholars morph into public intellectuals, influencing debates outside of academia, that political defences are triggered (George et al., 2022).

For censors, one key benefit of narrowly tailored restrictions is that it isolates the victims. The occasional reports of censorship generate only a brief flare of public indignation. The targeted academic's own peers often withhold solidarity, since they do not fear that they would be next. The Sol Iglesias case was taken up by the international network, Scholars at Risk, and there were calls to boycott the NUS conference. One of the keynote speakers who was also from the Philippines did decide to stay away, but the event was otherwise unaffected by the controversy. Not just its own staff but also foreign scholars keen on international collaborations cannot afford to burn bridges with NUS, a major higher education powerhouse.

In theory, even targeted restrictions on academic (as well as artistic) expression could backfire by choking the appetite for risk and wellsprings of creativity needed for a vibrant knowledge economy. But in practice, so far there is scarce evidence that an economy cannot be globally competitive unless it *maximises* political, academic, or creative freedom. Singapore – as well as China's top universities – show that selective liberalisation (the other side of the coin of targeted censorship) can generate dividends.

Singapore's censorship dampens the kind of robust public discourse that citizens of a democracy should be entitled to, but this has not thwarted the country's ambition to be a global research and education hub. Nor has censorship hurt its universities' global rankings, since ranking agencies do not measure academic freedom (Kinzelbach et al., 2020). Global league tables are not benchmarked against the emancipatory potential of education, but are instead aligned with more instrumental, neoliberal expectations requiring universities to serve economic needs — making rankings generally compatible with authoritarian states' own priorities (Holz, 2021).

Performative Censorship

Understanding today's restrictions on academia requires us to rethink not only the source and extent

of censorship, but also its goals. We tend to interpret censors' intentions literally: if they want to ban something, it must be because they see it as so harmful that it must be removed from circulation. However, scholars of contentious politics and law have pointed out that regulation may have goals that are symbolic or expressive (Zurcher & Kirkpatrick, 1976; Sunstein, 1996; Gusfield, 1963). Applying these insights to censorship, I argue that parties who demand or impose censorship may do so to signpost their values, with little or no expectation that their actions will actually reduce the visibility of the verboten (George, 2024b). Indeed, some may be quite aware that censorship will trigger the Streisand Effect, giving the censored much more exposure than before.

A lot of censorship in education would not make sense if we were oblivious to its performative aspects. The American Right's crusade against so-called wokeism as well as Diversity, Equity and Inclusion or DEI on campuses has caused enormous disruptions, but its impact has been more patchy than total. In many cases, DEI is just repackaged in new forms (Gretzinger et al., 2026; Schachle-Gordon et al., 2025). It is also probable that the anti-woke crusaders know this, but in some cases choose to look the other way if they feel they have achieved their expressive or performative objectives. In this reading, wokeism is not a literal taboo for the Right; it could be what Madigan (2023) calls an inverted totem – the Right rails against woke as a way to express what the Right is not. After all, it is often easier for an in-group to represent its identity by what it opposes than to articulate the attributes its members have in common.

Beyond culture wars, the concept of performative censorship helps explain my own experiences with censorship in Singapore. None of my cancelled talks had to do with the proposed content being too toxic for public consumption. Two were talks about a new book, which was at the time freely on sale in Singapore. (A quick check reveals that the NUS Library stocks at least five copies, three in English and two in Chinese translation.) The other seminar was to be about my research on censorship in Asia, about which I have academic articles that are also easily accessible to students in Singapore. As for Sol Iglesias, she was not going to be talking about Singapore at all, but about the Philippines.

"These cancelled engagements, on subjects and by speakers already circulating in the public sphere, could not credibly be considered a risk to students or the wider public," an AcademiaSG (2025) editorial observed. University administrators' only plausible reason for such censorship was to avoid triggering government ministers, we added. The same motive appears to underlie the current practice of at least two Singapore universities to vet research proposals. They supplement the standard research ethics review process with a parallel system for assessing the risk that their faculty's proposed projects pose to the university management's reputation in the eyes of their political masters. "While ethics reviews protect human subjects being researched, political vetting seems designed to protect the vetters themselves," our editorial noted.

As I've argued elsewhere (George, 2024b; George, 2025), universities and other large institutions are major repositories of symbolic power, and as such are especially vulnerable to performative censorship. For any group wanting to protect or gain symbolic status – from political parties to culture warriors of any colour or creed – getting these institutions to endorse or platform its worldviews and echo its positions can amount to a major win. Conversely, allowing these institutions to showcase the group's opponents would count as a setback, even if the same ideas are freely circulated elsewhere. University administrators who understand their institution's symbolic power – and know that politicians also know – are prone to performative impulses in their regulation of campus speech. Although we tend to think of universities' prestige as an asset – as it

indeed is – it is also a liability in an age when political actors at every level and across the spectrum want it used for their own benefit.

Victimless Censorship?

Within the bureaucratic logics that dominate higher education, restrictions to academic freedom that should be resisted are rationalised as reasonable. Acts of institutionalised, targeted, and performative censorship are framed as necessary accommodations to a real world where universities must secure support from holders of political and economic power. University leaders may justify the internal vetting of research activities, for example, as performing due diligence to protect the institution's reputation in the eyes of these external parties. Whether those power holders' expectations are in line with a university's stated principles is an inconvenient question brushed aside in the name of its strategic objectives.

In the corporatised university, such approaches to governance are judged by their results on balance sheets and global rankings. The results can be very impressive, and since interventions are highly targeted, most employees and students benefit from the university's success. In the Singapore model, which may appear increasingly attractive to governments and university administrators in illiberal societies, the governance system is so fine-tuned that there is little resistance from academics. On the contrary, Singapore continues to project academic excellence and attract talent from around the world.

It can even seem as if its politically-motivated censorship is virtually victimless – but only when we confine ourselves within the narrowly instrumental corporate logics. The picture looks different when we remember that academic freedom is not solely for academics but ultimately for the public. As expressed in aspirational documents such as the aforementioned Magna Charta Universitatum and UNESCO's declaration on higher education, higher education should help build free and equitable societies. Universities are "potential sites in which to articulate new political imaginaries and alternative futures that push back against rising authoritarianism and the massive injustices facing human and nonhuman worlds" (Darian-Smith, 2025, p. 611).

Unfortunately, this is not the dominant view. Even if eloquently expressed in convocation speeches, the higher purposes of higher education do not typically hold sway in board meetings. A more instrumental ethos dominates the higher education industry. To varying degrees, censorship that violates academic freedom is not isolated or exceptional but structural. Over time, the occasional application of carrots and sticks gets routinised as a system of incentives and disincentives. This influences not just what gets published or presented, but even what lines of inquiry we academics choose to pursue and what questions we silently suppress within our own minds. Then, whether we realise it or not, we all become participant observers in problematic forms of academic censorship.

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