FEARS that academics here are "cabin'd cribbed confined", to quote Shakespeare's Macbeth, have long dogged Singapore's ambitions to become an education hub.

In a 2001 interview with The Straits Times, two officers from the Economic Development Board (EDB) said as much.

Both were at the forefront of the elaborate courting rituals to entice foreign universities to set up here.

Everywhere, the issue foreign academics assailed them repeatedly over was: freedom of expression.

Mr Tan Chek Ming, then the director of the board's services development division, said that inevitably the Christopher Little case would also crop up.

Dr Lingle, an American teaching at the National University of Singapore (NUS), fled the country in 1994 after he was charged with contempt of court over an article he wrote in the International Herald Tribune.

But such worries seemed as though they had receded into the background, especially with more collaborations with foreign universities.

Mr Tan's successor at EDB, Mr Kenneth Tan, has been courting foreign universities for the last four years. In that time, freedom of expression has never been the main concern, he tells Insight.

"The big issue now is the direction universities should take, including whether they should expand overseas as a way to maintain their relevance to the global economy," he says.

But this week, the question of whether academics here can speak their minds reared its head again. The controversy this time centred on Britain's Warwick University.

It decided against setting up a branch campus here after its 48-member senate, made up of faculty and a few students, voted against the move. Worries over the lack of academic freedom helped tipped the scales against Singapore.

Warwick economics professor Andrew Oswald tells Insight from England: "Our academics feel there is no true freedom of speech in Singapore. The author Salman Rushdie, for example, spoke at Warwick this week and we doubt that would have been allowed in Singapore."

Mr Rushdie's book, The Satanic Verses, is banned here for religious reasons.

Before deciding, Warwick took pains to find out more about Singapore. In August, it hired National University of Singapore law professor Thio Li Ann to write a paper on the constraints on freedom of expression here, and how this might thwart teaching and research activities.

"The report is confidential. As part of its negotiations with EDB, Warwick also sought special exemptions for its staff and students."

In one letter to EDB, it asked that its students in Singapore be exempted from strict laws on freedom of assembly, speech and the press, along with a request to remove bans on homosexuality and certain religious practices on campus, the Financial Times reported last Saturday.

Warwick also "sought guarantees that staff and students would not be punished by the Singapore Government for making academic-related comments that might be seen as being outside the boundaries of political debate".

Outdated views?

BUT some faculty members of Australia's University of New South Wales (UNSW), the only full-fledged foreign university here, wonder if these fears are exaggerated.

UNSW deputy vice-chancellor John Ingleson says: "It often surprises me how people have this picture of Singapore $5, 20 years ago; not the Singapore now."

"We have seen the boundaries opening up in Singapore and we believe it will open up further."

"To what extent are fears of restraints on academics imagined rather than real? How much latitude do they have here enjoy? If they want to criticise Singapore policies and practices, are they free to do so?"

Insight tried to canvass views from both local and foreign academics here.

Of the 17 academics approached, six declined to comment, itself an indication that some do feel constrained in what they can say to the press.

Another five did not return calls. But six of those contacted were forthcoming with their views.

SMS, e-mail us your views

DO YOU believe academics here are constrained by how much they can say; write and teach? Have you ever encountered occasions when dons clam up or tell you to shut up?

Tell us. E-mail ap@stpl.com.sg, or SMS to 9827-7314. For SMS messages, type stop, followed by a space, your message and full name.

Among them was New Zealander Natasha Hamilton-Hart, who does research on South-east Asia.

In her five years at NUS, there have been times when she asked herself if there would be unpleasant consequences were she to put in writing some of her thoughts on Singapore officials and personalities.

"In the end, I've always gone ahead and written it anyway and, so far, there have been no negative repercussions," she says.

She published in 2000 a paper entitled "The Singapore State Revisited". It examined the reasons for the lack of corruption here and asked how this was so despite the many links between the political and business elite — including documenting the Lee family's roles, an area some would consider a no-go zone.

She acknowledges that were she teaching elsewhere, questions over what she could or could not write probably would not even arise.

"People here will tell you, you shouldn't write that, that's dangerous, so the atmosphere is different because there are past cases they can point to."

"But having said that, academic freedom is also coming under assault in the US. It is not a perfect model," she says.

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Academic freedom: Hard to swallow?

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The six academics interviewed also say there are no restrictions in what they teach.

NUS political scientist Suzania Kadir, a Singaporean, says that she and her students have been free to examine policies critically, even in potentially-sensitive areas such as ethnic management. "My task is to get students to think very carefully about the implications of these policies and when you do that, you may come out in support or think critically of them. Students and I have been free to say what we want," she says.

Still, it would seem that a fair number of academics prefer to steer clear of doing research on Singapore.

One view is that this is due to their concerns over constraints they would face in carrying out critical studies of the Singapore system. Insight did find a check of the working papers produced by NUS' political science, sociology and economics departments to see how many were focused on Singapore.

The results: seven papers on Singapore out of 8 total of 23 for political science since 1991, and 25 out of 47 for sociology.

As for the economics department, it has published 57 working papers since 2001, of which only five were on Singapore.

But NUS' president Shih Choon Fong does not think the lack of interest in research on Singapore is due to concerns about a lack of academic freedom.

He tells Insight that the bias toward research on other countries is because top academic journals based in the West are less interested in Asian issues.

"The dominant ideas or opinion makers are mostly found in Western countries. But you publish, what do academics do? They talk about things of interest to the West," he says.

He hopes to correct this imbalance by finding ways to encourage scholarly work done on South-East Asia.

Freedom yes, but...

SO IF academics here are indeed free to say and write what they think, then where exactly does the problem lie?

What accounts for the few and far between though they may be — when the Government has stepped in to censor or rebate points made by academics that, in turn, worsen the climate of scholarly reticence, if not fear?

As American lecturer Benjamin Detenber, who teaches media psychology at the Nanyang Technological University, the crucial difference lies in where the academic chooses to say what he has to say.

When he first arrived here seven years ago, he was given this piece of advice by a senior member of his faculty.

"He told me you can pretty much study and publish what you want in the academic press, but once you go to the public you would seem like you are seen to be trying to make political hay," he says.

BOUNDARIES WIDENING

"It often surprises me how people have this picture of Singapore 15, 20 years ago; not the Singapore now. We have seen the boundaries opening up in Singapore and we believe it will open up further."

UNSW DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR JOHN INGLESON

The phrase refers to people who try to take advantage of a situation.

The advice by the senior academic was probably grounded in past experience and on that score, perhaps the most high-profile clash between an academic and the Government took place in 1960.

That year, English professor D. J. Enright was rebuffed by a minister for comments he made during a public lecture, which were perceived as critical of Malay culture.

Shortly after the incident, then prime minister Lee Kuan Yew set out in a speech to the University of Malaya's student's union the Government's position on academics who chose to comment on Singapore politics.

An academic's freedom of inquiry and research should not be challenged by either governmental or university authorities, he said.

But this privilege did not extend to the political arena, where the academic "is not the competent disinterested explorer of human knowledge".

Mr Lee went on to say: "There is nothing to prevent him from going into this arena if he is a citizen and so entitled. But he enters the field not as a university teacher but as a citizen and must be ready for the hurly-burly which other citizens entering this arena indulge in."

Recent clashes between state and academics would suggest that these rules of the game apply.

And some like sociologist Chua Beng Hock have no problems with speaking in public on those terms. After he criticized housing policy at a public forum last year, the Housing Board issued a strong rebuttal.

He has shrugged off the incident and tells Insight: "If I make some comment or write an essay and it gets in the press, I expect the Government to respond to me. It doesn't bother me."

In conclusion

SO IS there academic freedom in Singapore. The answer seems to depend on how one understands the phrase.

To university chiefs and some academics here, the answer is an unequivocal yes. The way they see it, there are no restrictions placed on what academics can research or teach within the scholarly realm.

So what constraints on freedom are critics talking about?

But not all scholars are content to influence opinion or shape thinking solely within this small circle.

Those who venture into speaking on Singapore's social, economic and political issues in public, and that includes the academic, can expect to be treated differently.

When and how, though, they are treated differently are assessments made at the discretion of the political leadership, making navigating between the realm of academic freedom and citizen engagement a risky exercise.

This is especially so for foreigners who have never lived here and worry that they might not be able to read the warning signals as well as Singaporeans can.

The bottom line is that academics, whether local or foreign, are exempt neither from the laws of the land nor from the rules of engagement, as they currently stand.

Will this change? Only when Singapore society as a whole becomes more open and receptive to diverse points of view. Academic freedom, in other words, flows from and feeds on other freedoms in other spheres of life here.