A Pandora’s Box in Singapore

The government wants higher education to be more creative, but is it prepared for the likely result?

BY MARTHA ANN GRYLLAND

W hen students interview ask Kirpal Singh who they are required to take his course in creative thinking, the Singapore Management University professor tells them it’s simple: “It’s to make the damage that 12 years of schooling has done to you!”

Mr. Singh knows that many see the course he helped design for the country’s new cutting-edge university as frivolous. Perhaps his creative-thinking class is too much fun to take for credit. But his mission is serious: to light the creative spark that years of rote learning extinguished, and prod students to think for themselves.

“Self-censorship has made people afraid,” says Mr. Singh, referring to the taboos in Singapore to watch what one says for fear of causing offense or breaking the law. “It’s important for them to be bold, brave, and robust.”

He wrote an essay in the Singapore Management U. has introduced a creative-thinking course in a bid to help
“under the damage” of years of rote learning, says Kirpal Singh (above), one of the instructors. “Self-censorship has made people afraid. It is important for them to be bold, brave, and robust.”

The leap from good to great requires taking
undesirable names and hurtful ideas to those who have been too guarded and too afraid. For example, we only do research if somebody pays for it. But in its relentless drive to keep its competitive edge, Singapore is no longer content to produce only engineers and technocrats, says Thamrin Shamsuddin, a minister for education. The government wants to foster a dynamic environment that can attract thinkers and leaders in many fields, not just science. Singapore’s plan is to present itself as a leader in biomedical sciences, entertainment, technology, and the arts.

In its early days of the class, the projects required a police permit:
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taking a risk and creating boundaries,” says Mr. Singh, a third-generation Singaporean. “We have to be too guarded and too afraid. For example, we only do research if somebody pays for it. That kind of thinking thwarts potential and diminishes true great thinking.”

It is no secret that Singapore wants to be great. Over the past decade it has pumped billions of dollars into higher education, resulting in some of the strongest universities in the region. But the new efforts to lure in and win over top universities, research institutes, artists, and academics have not hesitated to use the law—namely the Sedition Act—to rein them in. Comments that might cause offense or breaking the law.

In a deeply conservative society, governed by a powerful single political party that permits little criticism, too much independent thinking can be a liability.

“They have the model to be more intellectually vibrant,” says Daniel A. Bell, a professor of political science at Beijing’s Tsinghua University, who taught in Singapore in the 1990s. “But there are restrictions on how much you can comment on local politics and the performance of particular leaders. It’s a creative conundrum.”

Real scholarship in the field of liberal arts, he adds, requires that people be allowed to speak freely and think critically, and without fear of repercussions.

THE POWER OF LAWSUITS

For academics who have pushed too hard and criticized too loudly, Singapore’s laws have not been lenient to use the law—namely the Sedition Act and the Sedition Act—this is illustrated by the following case. Mr. Lingle, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore, was told to publicly retract his claims or face criminal defamation charges.

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In 1995 a psychology lecturer who publicly complained that his firing was politically motivated— and not triggered by his use of grant money to purchase postage stamps—was fined $3,200. Three lecturers who made a short documentary in 2001 on a political dissident had their offices raided by police and the film confiscated. They were charged with legal action until they paid fines.

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Free Thinkers in Singapore

Trying to produce creative graduates, the government may get more than it bargained for: A38