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# Warwick's decision disrupts Singapore's plans

By John Burton

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A decision by Warwick University to abandon plans for a Singapore campus due to worries about academic freedom might set back efforts by the city-state to attract top western universities in its quest to become a "global schoolhouse".

Warwick said yesterday it would not proceed with plans to set up a full-scale university campus in Singapore after the faculty last week voted against it by a 2-1 margin on the grounds of academic freedom and financial cost.

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However, the university said it might propose an alternative plan later.

The move is a blow to Singapore's ambitions to become a regional hub for higher education since the proposed facility was to have been one of the biggest foreign university campuses on the island, along with one for Australia's University of New South Wales (UNSW).

Singapore's Economic Development Board (EDB), which is responsible for attracting educational institutions to the city-state, would not comment on whether it would start looking for a foreign university to replace Warwick.

Officials have spoken of Singapore becoming the "Boston of the east" with a cluster of top universities like Harvard and MIT. The government wants education services to account for 5 per cent of gross domestic product, up from 3.6 per cent, within the next decade.

But Warwick's decision could make academic freedom a more important factor among foreign educational institutions in deciding whether to set up in Singapore.

"It cannot help but do so," said Kris Olds, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who has studied academic freedom issues in Singapore after teaching for six years at the National University of Singapore. "The issue will need to be grappled with in a systematic way by both local and foreign universities in Singapore and the government over the next one to three years" if the island wanted to achieve its "global education hub" goal, he said.

Singapore requires international educational institutions operating there to agree not to conduct activities seen as interfering in domestic affairs.

Warwick's staff and students were concerned not only about possible limits on academic research but the application of Singapore's strict laws on speech, assembly and the press to campus activities. The Warwick campus would have been home to 10,000-15,000 students, 75 per cent of whom would have been foreign.

EDB officials have said academic freedom was not a key issue with foreign universities and cited the fact that 16 institutions, including Insead and the University of Chicago Graduate Business School, have set up schools or partnerships.

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Mr Olds said most of the schools coming to Singapore were specialised institutes “less commonly associated with politically contentious issues”. In contrast, Warwick would offer a range of social science studies that might encounter problems.

UNSW said it had discussed academic freedom with the Singapore government. “We recognise that there could be potential problem areas, given that the legal framework for political expression and the defamation laws in Singapore are more restrictive than in Australia,” said John Ingleson, UNSW's deputy vice-chancellor (international).

“Obviously, staff and students must respect the laws of the country they are in. If issues concerning academic freedom on campus do arise, we are confident they can be worked through and that's certainly the understanding we have reached with the government.”

Foreign universities in Singapore had a greater degree of autonomy than local universities as a result of negotiations with the government, said Mr Olds.

Local academics can still draw official ire when they comment on politics. Cherian George, a journalism professor at the Nanyang Technological Institute, was accused last week of advocating support for a civil disobedience campaign led by an opposition politician after he wrote an article on the subject in a local newspaper.

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