FEARS that academics here are "cabinined chribed 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 chaffers from the Economic Development Board (EDB) said so 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," said Tan Chor Ming, then the director of the board's services division, and that inevitably the Christopher Lingle 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 con- tainment 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 universi- ties.

Mr Tan's successor at EDB, Mr Kenneth Tan, has been courting for- eign universities for the last four years. In that time, freedom of expression has not been the main concern, he tells Insight...

"The big issue now is the direction universities should take, in- cluding 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 needed 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 tip the scales against Singapore.

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

"The UK is in a religious society, the Satanic is banned here for religious reasons."

Before deciding, Warwick took pains to find out more about Singa- pore. In August, a hired National University of Singapore law profes- sor Tin Li-Kien wrote a paper on the constraints on freedom of expres- sion here, and how this might thwart teaching and research activi- ties.

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

In one letter to EDB, it asked that its students in Singapore be ex- empted from strict laws on freedom of assembly, speech and the press, along with a request to remove bars on homosexuality and certain reli- gious practices on campus. The Fin- ancial Times reported last Satur- day.

Warwick also sought guarantee- es 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 bound- aries of political debate."

Outdated views?

But some faculty members of Aus- tralia's University of New South Wales (UNSW), the only full-fledged foreign university here, wonder if these fears are exagger- ated.

UNSW deputy vice-chancellor John Inglesby says: "It often sur- prises me how people have this pic- ture of Singapore, 15 years ago, and the Singapore now.

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

"Take water. What about of re- straint on academics imagining rather than no? How much restraint do you think you are here? If they want to criti- cise Singapore policies and practices, are they free to do so?"

"Insights tried to canvass views from both local and foreign aca- demics here.

Of the 17 academics app- roached, 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 every encountered occasions when dons claim up or tell you so?

Tell us. E-mail email@polyph.com.sg, or SMS to 9827-7514. For SMS messages, type intro, followed by a space, your message and full name.

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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 personali- ties.

"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 Re- vanced". 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 docu- menting the Lee family's roles, an area some would consider a no-go zone.

She acknowledged that she was 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 danger- ous, so the atmosphere is different because there are past cases they can point to.

"But having said that, academic freedom is also coming under ass- salt in the US. It is not a perfect model," she says.
Finances, not freedom, worried Warwick University

BY SANDRA DAVIE & HO AI LI

Expensive plan

NO DOUBT, Warwick’s Singapore proposal is ambitious and expensive.

Earlier reports estimated that the campus for 10,000 students would cost £85 million ($S257 million). Of this amount, the EDB would put in £10 million of grant money and a further £75 million loan, and the shortfall would come from Warwick.

More recent estimates are higher.

In a feasibility study released early this month, building costs are put at around £122 million over three phases, with facilities such as the library and computer centre costing another £130 million. This excludes research funding.

The report did not say how much EDB was prepared to fund, but suggested that it would be “unacceptable”.

The economics of the deal led many Warwick academics to conclude that the Singapore venture would be a risky one, fraught with implacable implications for the university’s reputation if it failed to achieve an impressive standard. This concern was also coupled with fears that Warwick would lay down stretching itself too thin at home base.

It was thus argued that it would be better off offshoring its resources entirely for the British campus.

Some of the Warwick professors who went on the record said as much.

Professor Malcolm McCraw said he did not doubt that for some of his colleagues, the issue of academic freedom was important.

But it was not his perception, he said, “that issues around the question of academic freedom were the main reason.”

Apparently, Warwick did try to convey its doubts over the commercial viability of the second campus to the EDB.

But according to Prof McCraw, in the end, “the reassurances that were provided by the Singapore end were just not sufficient to tip the risk versus benefit equation”.

His colleague in the economics department, Prof Andrew Oswald, agreed that academic freedom was only one of many considerations.

To him, the main dilemma was whether Warwick should concentrate on being a world-class research university in just one location.

“International students should come to our site, not the other way around,” he said.

He also posed the question: If Warwick were to go ahead, wouldn’t the United States — the epicentre of academic excellence — be the natural option?

Why Asia as its first stop?

Vying for students

There was also the worry of whether Warwick would get the cream of the crop in Singapore.

The best students still prefer to go to the top local universities here, which also charge lower fees.

Warwick was planning to charge fees of around £12,000 a year.

The majority of Singapore university students, except for those in medicine and dentistry, pay about £6,000 a year.

Then there’s also the worry over quality of staff.

As one Warwick academic, who declined to be named, said: “A big campus for 10,000 students and competitors charging hundreds of staff. And top-notch faculty is difficult to find.

“If you have the lesser academic in the Singapore campus, then it will be seen to be second rate.”

Yet another concern was that if Warwick were to go ahead, it wouldn’t be the United States — the epicentre of academic excellence — but the natural option?

Why Asia as its first stop?

TOO BIG A RISK

“Warwick is a very new university. Oxford and Cambridge had a 500-year head start... For us to set up a campus in Singapore when our academics are already working flat out is a very challenging thing to do. It’s too big a step at one go.”

SINGAPOREAN PROFESSOR, who said the Singapore offer could not have come at a worse time.

Senior fellow Nick Matthews, who is disappointed that the Singapore campus plan did not take off, said the Singapore offer could not have come at a worse time.

The academic from the Warwick Manufacturing Group, which works with companies on applied technology, said: “We’ve got a completely new senior management team which is just learning to manage Warwick.

“To ask the team to manage the Singapore campus at such a time is too big a risk.”

It did not help that vice-chancellor Vandrelinde was stepping down next year.

This prompted concerns over who would carry through the decision and be held accountable among the university’s bigwigs.

Said Mr Matthews: “Warwick is a very new university. Oxford and Cambridge had a 500-year head start. To stay among the top universities, we have to work a lot faster and harder than they do.

“For us to set up a campus in Singapore when our academics are already working flat out is a very challenging thing to do. It’s too big a step at one go.”