

# *S'pore research: Key is access to info*

## It's not true that research on our country is not publishable; challenge lies in getting data

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An old saw that I still hear in university corridors is that “we cannot publish Singapore research”.

Indeed, the National University of Singapore (NUS) Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences is organising a discussion on the very issue. How true is the claim? And, if true, what should be done about it?

First, some data. In 2015, Singapore's gross domestic product was about US\$296 billion (S\$408 billion). The US state with an economy closest in size to ours is Missouri. To understand how difficult it is to publish research on Singapore, I searched the Arts & Humanities and Social Sciences Citation Indexes.

Between 1975 and this year, there were 9,009 publications on

Singapore, compared with 2,892 on Missouri. Apparently, it was three times more difficult to publish research on a US state with an economy of similar size. So, it should be professors at Washington University in St Louis and the University of Missouri complaining that journals discriminate against research on Missouri!

My citation search suggests that the academic world is quite interested in Singapore. The reason is very likely the willingness of our Government to experiment and innovate in policy. A very short list would include the Central Provident Fund for retirement planning, Medisave for healthcare, certificates of entitlement (COEs) and electronic road pricing to manage traffic congestion, the dependency ratio and levy to regulate the inflow of foreign workers, gifted education policy, and presumed consent to increase organ donations.

These policies bear on issues that are important throughout the world. Research on the policies would interest academic social scientists and policymakers everywhere. For instance, my citation search found 19 articles on the Central Provident Fund, 15 of which were published in international journals (the other four were in the *Singapore Economic Review*). Similarly, my citation search found four articles on certificate of entitlement, which is a uniquely Singapore policy.

However, it could be argued that the numbers of publications do not compare like for like. Perhaps, given the inherent innovativeness of our Government as compared with Missouri's, there should be five or 10 times more publications on Singapore. But our Government is too secretive. So the problem is not that journals do not wish to publish research about Singapore, but rather the challenge is access to information. There is certainly some truth to this line of argument. Singaporeans do not have any legal right to public-sector information. Even as a foreigner, I used the US

Freedom of Information Act to compile a dataset that provided the basis for three research papers in top journals. But I cannot do that in my own country.

Fortunately, the private sector has been helpful. A major bank provided my colleague, Professor Sumit Agarwal, with detailed data on the banking, debit and credit card transactions of 180,000 customers between 2010 and 2012. With this data, Prof Sumit and Associate Professor Qian Wenlan analysed the effect of the Growth Dividend announced in Budget 2011. They found that it significantly increased household consumption, and published their research in the *American Economic Review*.

A car dealer provided me with maintenance records of all cars sold between 2000 and 2013, during which period COE premiums first fell and then rose sharply. Together with Professor Ho Teck Hua (NUS) and Assistant Professor Sadat Reza (Nanyang Technological University), I compared the usage of cars bought in different years. We found that people who bought

cars when COE premiums were high tended to drive more – an unintended consequence of a policy intended to reduce traffic congestion. Our research is published in the *Management Science* journal.

Historically, the Government has tended not to share information with social science researchers. The good news is that the Government is opening up. The portal, [data.gov.sg](http://data.gov.sg), is a major step forward. In another important step, the Government established the Social Science Research Council and committed \$350 million to research in the humanities and social sciences.

The council will not only fund research but also work towards improving the data environment for social science and humanities research in Singapore. This is vital because state-of-the-art research depends on robust micro-data about individual people and businesses.

Even more promising is the willingness of government agencies to collaborate with researchers in field experiments to better understand human behaviour. For instance, my

colleague Yang Nan and Land Transport Authority economist Lim Yong Long carried out an experiment at two MRT stations. They investigated the effect of free travel and a 50-cent discount on commuter decisions to advance travel before the 8am peak hour. They found a 5.5 per cent shift towards earlier travel, and the effect persisted even after the end of the promotion. Their findings were recently published in *Management Science*.

So the claim that Singapore research is not publishable is not true. Rather, the challenge is access to information. But on that front, there has been clear progress. We can look forward to more research on Singapore that will not only inform the academic community but, hopefully, also help the Government to make better policies.

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