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What are the challenges facing the Asian academic profession?

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Abstract

This study discusses major findings from an international survey of the academic profession and presents an analysis of the challenges facing academics in a number of countries in East and Southeast Asia. These include the ageing of the academic profession and deteriorating working conditions in Japan and Taiwan, the need to build both capacity and excellence in developing contexts such as in Cambodia and Vietnam, unsatisfactory governance and management arrangements in Japan and China, and more importantly, imbalances in development in the academic profession between different countries and systems within the continent. The study also offers implications for research and policy.

Keywords: academic profession, East Asia, challenge, comparative higher education

Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the academic profession plays a decisive role in determining the identity and quality of national higher education systems. Despite massive differences existing in the academic profession in many countries in East and Southeast Asia, the formation of the academic profession as part of these countries' higher education systems in the region was modelled on western patterns in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Altbach & Selvaratnam, 1989). Even during the Cold War period the shaping and development of the academic profession in the region were either affected by the former Soviet ideology and conventions or by US ideas and academic norms. For instance, soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the watchword in China was "to learn from the Soviet Union" in all aspects, including the academic system and producing university academics and researchers modelled on the Soviet Union. As a result, during the 1950s and early 1960s, many Soviet educators and specialists in various fields came to China. They helped restructure China's higher education system and train university faculty members and they carried out teaching and research activities at Chinese campuses and research institutes. As stated by Pepper (1996), since the latter half of the 1950s, the Soviet Union was dropped as an overt model but seemed to provide continuing "internal" reinforcement through a de-regularisation exercise of its own which occurred at the same time. In contrast, the modern Japanese universities were developed on the German research-oriented model in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But since the end of the WWII, the influence of US patterns on changes to the Japanese academy is significant and evident.

Since the late 1980s, impacted by new drivers such as globalisation, privatisation, marketisation, massification, constrained public budget, advancement of informational technology, and growing international competitiveness, the academic profession worldwide has been facing diverse and numerous challenges (Altbach 1997; Enders 1999). Noticeable challenges and crises include financial pressure, performance and accountability, declining academic power, erosion, deprofessionalisation, blurring academic identity, achieving a balance between teaching and research, and so forth. Further, existing literature shows that these challenges not only occur in emerging and underdeveloped countries such as Russia, central and Eastern European countries and the BRICS, they have also

expanded to advanced systems like the USA, the UK, and Australia (Altbach 2003; Smolentseva 2003; Altbach et al. 2013). For example, according to Honan & Teferra (2001), recently the US academic landscape has undergone significant changes under the influence of complex social, economic, technological, and demographic developments.

In Asia, challenges facing the academic profession have been affected not only by common factors mentioned above, but also by the regional and national implications of various drivers. These include the corporatisation of national and public universities, diversifying missions and functions of higher education institutions, increasing emphasis on research activities of universities, and competing for excellence and world class universities (Huang, 2006, 2011; Amano, 2014). When viewed more broadly in comparison to countries in North America and Europe, the main countries and systems in East and Southeast Asia are distinguished by their huge growth in higher education, marketisation, decentralisation and privatisation of higher education, and the increased effects of globalisation on higher education (Huang, 2011).

In terms of terminologies, phrases like the academy, academic profession, academics, faculty members, and professors have been employed interchangeably, except for a special mention: both the academy and the academic profession are used in the same sense in this study.

Review of literature and research design

Previous studies

Previous studies of the academic profession are mainly concerned with the following aspects. First, the formation of the academic profession in selected countries in the region. For example, Altbach and Selvaratnam (1989) conducted research into the impact of France, Germany, Britain, the US and even Japan on the formation of and changes in the modern higher education systems, including its academic profession, from the latter part of the nineteenth century. Kim (2001) also described the changing shape of the academic professions in Korea and Malaya or Malaysia and Singapore since the colonial period in the comparative perspective. With respect to the identity

of the academic profession in Asia, Hohle and Techler (2011) emphasise that hardly any similarity can be observed across all Asian countries as compared to other regions of the world. They are doubtful of the existence of an Asian academic profession. From the perspective of internationalisation, Huang and other researchers provided an overview of physical mobility patterns of the academic profession in Asia, Europe and North America, intra-regional teaching and research activities and patterns in foreign languages usage based on major findings from the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) surveys which were implemented in 2007-2008 in these regions (Huang, Finkelstein, Rostan, 2014). Also, Yonezawa, Horta, and Osawa (2016) analysed the mobility, formation and development of the academic profession in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in East and Southeast Asia. However, compared to research into crises and issues facing the academic profession in other continents or countries, research into challenges for the academic profession in Asia, supported by international surveys, is rare.

This study analyses the challenges facing the academic profession in a number of countries and systems in East and Southeast Asia based on major findings from an international survey which was implemented in seven selected Asian countries and systems in recent years. As I will discuss in the following section, with a rapidly changing national and social context and especially an increased impact from globalisation, the academic profession in these countries and systems faced significant challenges. These are concerned with demographic issues, deteriorating academics' working conditions, building both capacity and excellence in their academics, unsatisfactory governance and management arrangements in some systems, and, more importantly, imbalanced developments in the academic profession at a regional level. The study concludes by presenting prospective challenges facing Asia's academy and also implications for research and policy.

Based on the objectives of research above, this study will address two major research issues as follows:

1. What challenges are taking place in the academic profession in the participating teams?

2. What similarities and differences could be identified among the participating teams in relation to the challenges facing them?

Data and research method

The 2011-2012 international survey on the university faculty members in selected Asian countries is a follow-up to the previous two research projects on the academic profession. One is the international survey on the academic profession which was undertaken in 14 countries in 1991; the other is the international survey on CAP in which 19 countries, including Hong Kong, took part in 2007-2008 with a common questionnaire. By adopting similar questions from the two previous surveys and adding several new items, as of 2012-2014, eight Asian research teams carried out their national surveys with a similar questionnaire. They include Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Participating country teams agreed on a common sample design and data collection instrument, but implemented in their local languages. The target participants of this international survey included full-time academics from universities and colleges with a qualification of bachelor's degree or equivalent. The international survey in most systems was stratified by region, discipline, and control. For example, the survey of Japan in 2011 with 1,048 valid respondents, selected from 19 four-year institutions, according to institutional types and scale, also includes the private sector. Almost all countries used mail surveys. In order to minimise measurement bias across countries, country teams maintained a high level of standardisation in terms of question order, question wording, response options, reference periods, and layout and formal design. However, because of cultural patterns and language specifics, some country teams designed national extensions to the questionnaire. As the Indonesian team is not allowed by local authorities to share its data with the other participating teams, only the data of the seven teams are used for this study (see Table 1). In terms of valid responses, Cambodia (531), China (2,480), Taiwan (412), Japan (1,048), Malaysia (660), Singapore (166), Vietnam (800) are used.

Data and major findings

Table 1 shows the key characteristics of the academic profession in participating terms. By age, the smallest proportion of female academics was in Cambodia (13.6%), followed by Japan (15.3%), and Singapore (20.5%). By age, because the proportions of the academics aged above 50 years old in Taiwan and Japan are 52.8% and 45.7% of the totals respectively, it appears that there is an issue of an ageing of the academic population in these two systems. By discipline, except for 'Others', the proportions of the academy from Engineering and Agriculture in Cambodia, China, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore accounted for the largest share of the totals. This denotes that more emphasis was placed on the production of university graduates in practical and technical fields and applied research. By degree, among the seven systems, the smallest proportion of doctoral degree holders were found in Cambodia (9.6%), followed by Vietnam (28.7%).

Table 1. Major characteristics of national surveys in participating teams

Variables		Cambodia	China	Taiwan	Japan	Malaysia	Vietnam	Singapore	Total
		531	2480	412	1048	660	800	166	6897
Gender	Male	452 86.4%	1279 52.7%	259 64.0%	882 84.7%	396 61.3%	404 51.1%	132 79.5%	4538 65.8%
	Female	71 13.6%	1147 47.3%	146 36.0%	159 15.3%	250 38.7%	386 48.9%	34 20.5%	2359 34.2%
Age	20-29	105 20.4%	188 7.8%	2 .5%	20 2.0%	57 9.0%	190 24.6%	1 .6%	563 8.3%
	30-39	229 44.5%	1246 51.9%	44 11.1%	236 23.1%	234 36.9%	341 44.2%	56 34.6%	2529 37.2%
	40-49	122 23.7%	752 31.3%	142 35.7%	299 29.2%	143 22.5%	141 18.3%	48 29.6%	2082 30.6%
	50-59	53 10.3%	206 8.6%	134 33.7%	258 25.2%	155 24.4%	93 12.0%	41 25.3%	1210 17.8%
	Over 60	6 1.2%	10 .4%	76 19.1%	210 20.5%	46 7.2%	7 .9%	16 9.9%	422 6.2%
Discipline	Humanities	43 10.9%	425 17.5%	80 20.9%	112 10.8%	51 8.0%	113 16.8%	16 9.6%	1006 15.3%
	Social sciences	85 21.5%	653 27.0%	71 18.6%	130 12.5%	156 24.6%	205 30.6%	35 21.1%	1531 23.2%
	Sciences	62 15.7%	370 15.3%	39 10.2%	207 19.9%	63 9.9%	103 15.4%	27 16.3%	1030 15.6%
	Engineering & Agriculture	102 25.8%	659 27.2%	46 12.0%	346 33.3%	197 31.0%	37 5.5%	54 32.5%	1618 24.5%
	Other	104 26.3%	315 13.0%	146 38.2%	244 23.5%	168 26.5%	213 31.7%	34 20.5%	1408 21.4%
Degree	Doctor	49 9.6%	979 41.3%	347 86.5%	825 81.6%	486 75.3%	226 28.7%	147 91.9%	3927 57.9%
	Master	365 71.2%	1131 47.7%	51 12.7%	146 14.4%	142 22.0%	438 55.7%	11 6.9%	2311 34.1%
	Bachelor	99 19.3%	259 10.9%	3 .7%	40 4.0%	17 2.6%	123 15.6%	2 1.3%	543 8.0%

Source: Arimoto et Al. (2013) with author's modifications.

Note: *** p<0.001

Figure 1 Obtaining doctoral degree in country of current employment (%)

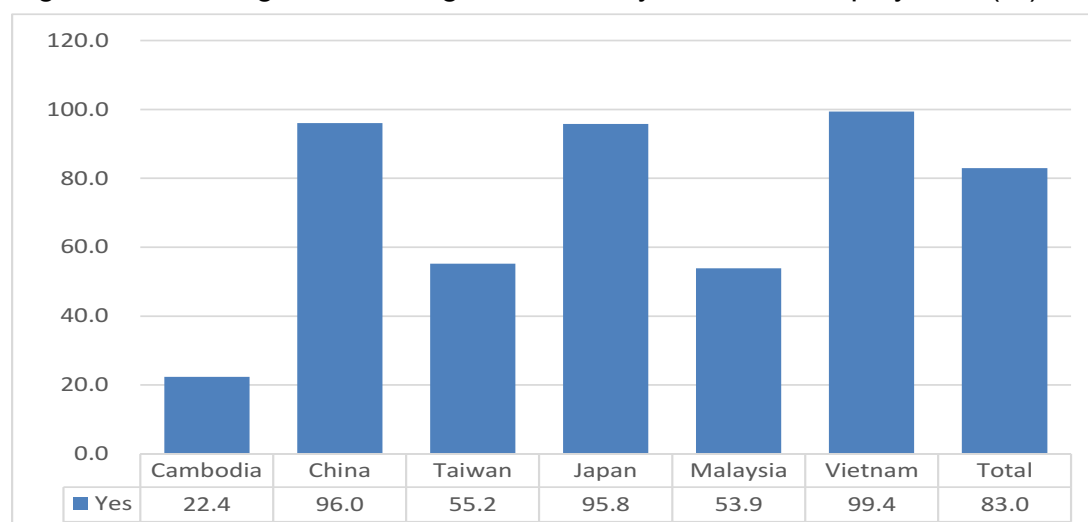|	Cambodia	China	Taiwan	Japan	Malaysia	Vietnam	Total
■ Yes	22.4	96.0	55.2	95.8	53.9	99.4	83.0

Figure 1 suggests that on average, more than 80 per cent of the academy in the six participating teams earned their doctoral degrees in countries of current employment. This reveals that a vast majority of the participating teams had established doctoral education systems and could produce their own doctoral students. Further, a large proportion of academics with doctoral degrees were educated and trained in domestic doctoral education systems. To illustrate, as high as 90 per cent of Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese academics, and over half of both Malaysian and Taiwanese academics, earned their doctoral degrees from their current institutions. By sharp contrast, among the Cambodian academics, only about 22 per cent earned their doctoral degrees from their current institutions. It appears that the production of high-level academics in Cambodia was primarily dependent on the doctoral education and training in foreign countries compared to other participating teams.

Figure 2 Regarding your own preferences, do your interests lie primarily in teaching or in research?
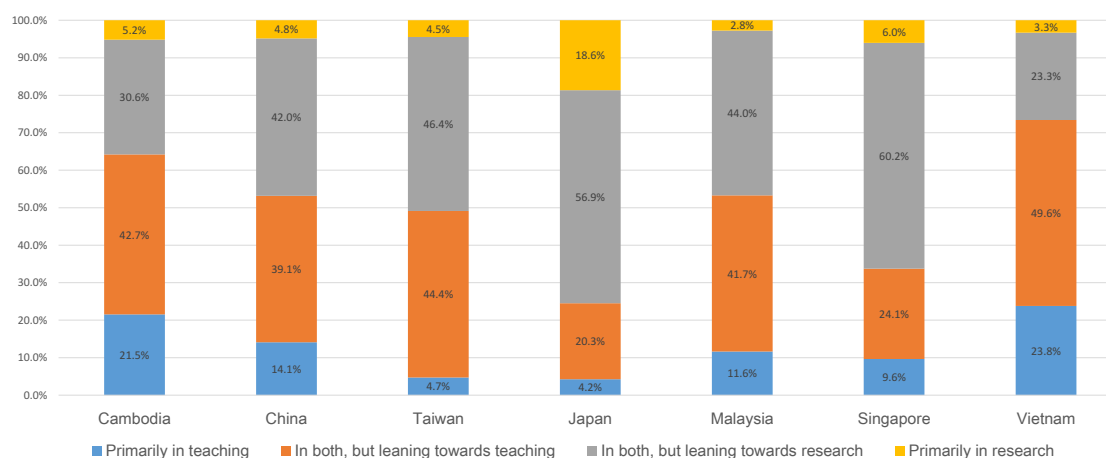

Figure 2 suggests that three groups of the academy could be identified. Because 63.7 per cent, 53.2 per cent, 53.3 per cent, and 73.4 per cent of the academy in Cambodia, China, Malaysia and Vietnam claimed that their interests are primarily in teaching and leaning towards teaching respectively, their academics could be categorised into a teaching-centered group. The academy in Japan and Singapore seems to belong to the research-intensive group because 75.5 per cent and 84.3 per cent of the academy in Japan and Singapore showed their interests primarily to be in research and leaning towards research respectively. Compared to the other two groups above, it appears that the academy in Taiwan belonged to the teaching and research balanced type because no significant difference could be confirmed between those being primarily interested in teaching, leaning towards teaching and those being primarily interested in research and leaning towards research.

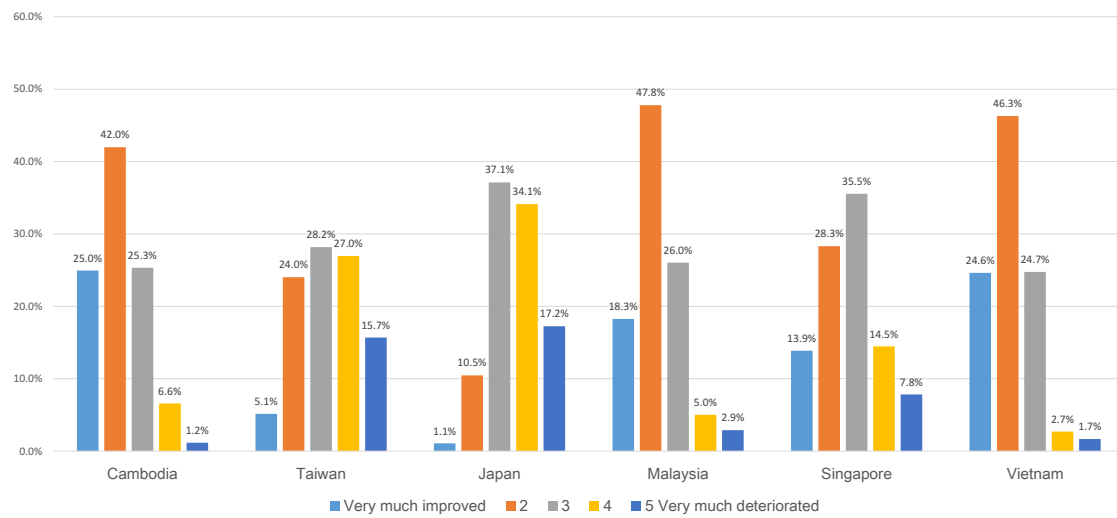Figure 3 Overall working conditions

Figure 3 shows that among the six participating teams, less than half of the academy in Taiwan (29.1%), Japan (11.6%), and Singapore (42.2%) stated that their overall working conditions had been very much improved and improved. By contrast, more than half of the academy from Cambodia (67%), Malaysia (66.1%) and Vietnam (70.9%) believed that their overall working conditions had been very much improved and improved. This is especially true in the cases of both Taiwan and Japan because in recent years there has been a steady decline in the allocated budget in higher education in the two systems.

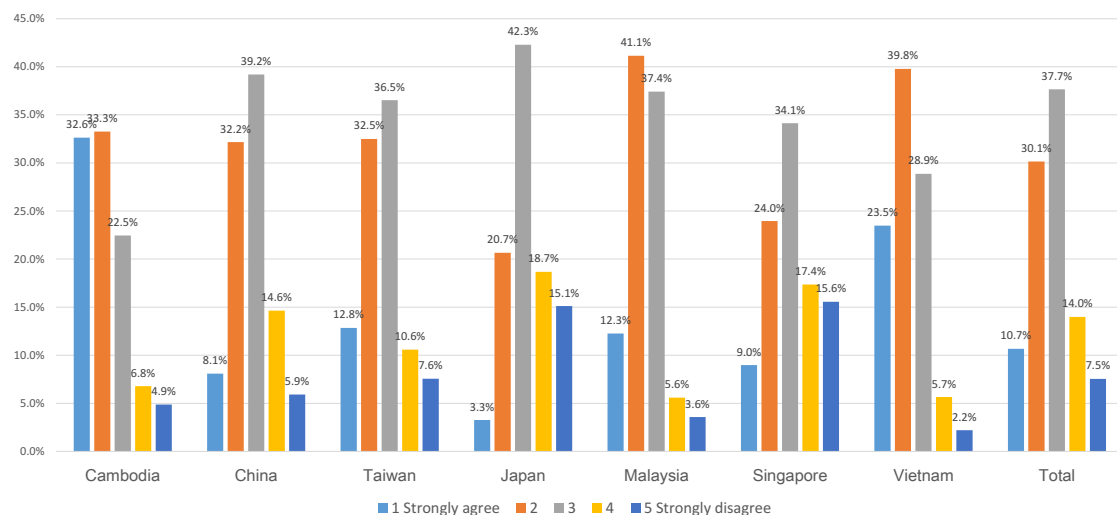Figure 4 A good communication between management and academics

Figure 4 demonstrates that the largest proportion of the academy in Cambodia (65.9%) answered that there was good communication between management and academics, followed by the academy from Vietnam (63.3%) and Malaysia (53.4%).

Less than half of the academy in Taiwan (45.3%), China (40.3%), Singapore (33%), and Japan (24%) strongly agreed and agreed with this statement. One of the most important reasons behind this seems to be that the introduction of market forces to higher education systems, the privatisation and corporatisation of national and local public sectors, and the implementation of other national strategies based on neoliberalism have all led to good communication between management and academics.

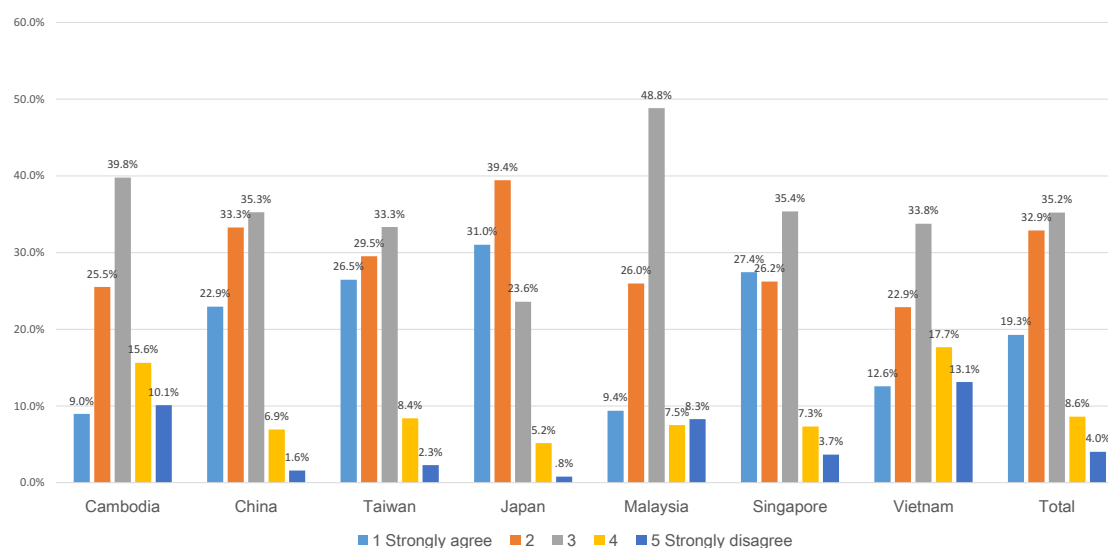Figure 5 A cumbersome administrative process

Figure 5 clearly reveals that on average, 52.2 per cent of the academy in the seven participating teams strongly agreed and agreed with the fact that there was a cumbersome administrative process in their institutions. However, the academy's views of this statement varied considerably depending on different systems. For example, as high as 70.4 per cent of the Japanese academy, followed by China (56.2%), Taiwan (56%), Singapore (53.6%), and Vietnam (52.2%), admitted this fact. By contrast, less than 40 per cent of the academy in Cambodia (34.5%) and Malaysia (35.4) responded that there was a cumbersome administrative process in their institutions. The responses are consistent with those in the data in Figure 4.

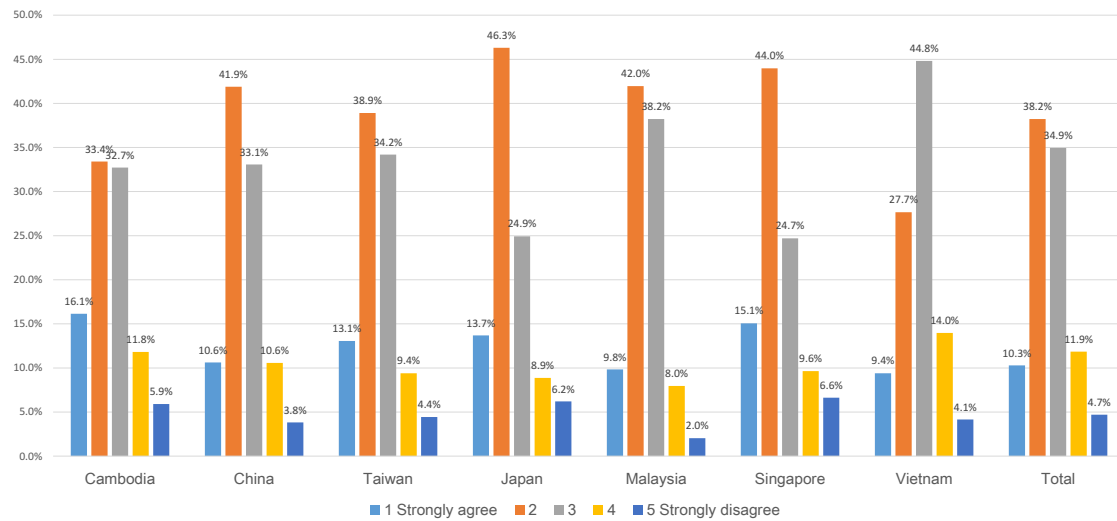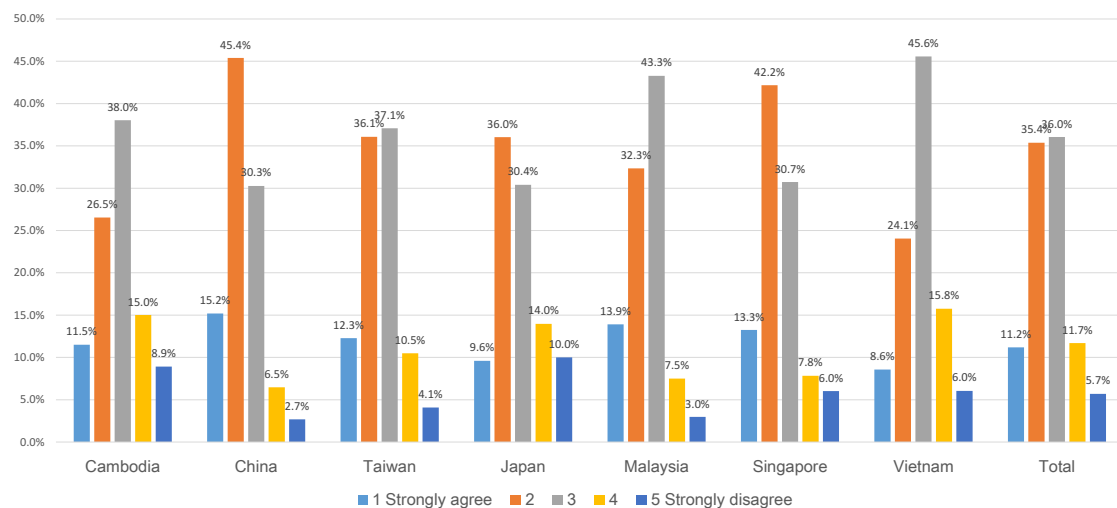Figure 6 Administrative staff supported academics' teaching

Figure 6 shows that more than half of the academy in China (52.5%), Taiwan (52 %), Japan (60%), Malaysia (51.8%), and Singapore (59.1%) strongly agreed and agreed that administrative staff supported their teaching in their institutions. Only 37.7 per cent of the academy in Vietnam and 49.5 per cent of the academy in Cambodia strongly agreed and agreed with this statement. Therefore, on average, 48.5 per cent of the academy in the participating teams strongly agreed and agreed that administrative staff supported their teaching in their institutions.

Figure 7 Administrative staff supported academics' research

Compared with the responses in Figure 6, Figure 7 indicates that fewer respondents strongly agreed and agreed that administrative staff supported their research in their institutions. Among the participating teams, only a large proportion of the respondents in China (60.6%) and in Singapore (55.5%) strongly agreed and agreed

that administrative staff supported their research in their institutions. Less than half of the respondents in the remaining countries shared the same views. These include the responses from Taiwan (48.4 %), Japan (45.6%), Malaysia (46.2%), Vietnam (32.7%) and Cambodia (38%). As a result, the average percentage of those who 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' that administrative staff supported their research in their institutions is 46.6 per cent of the totals.

Figure 8 A top-down management style
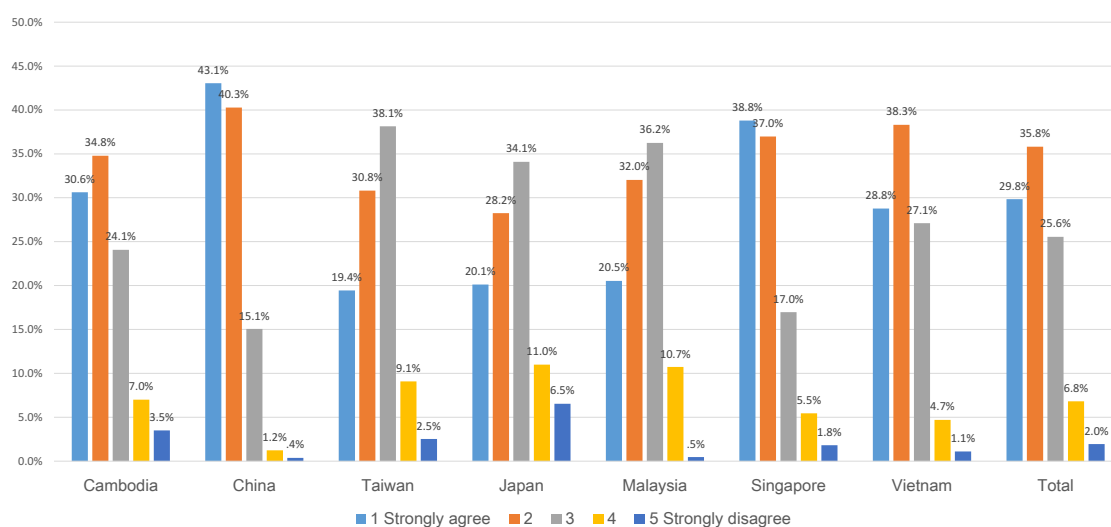
Finally, Figure 8 shows that on average, more than half of all the respondents (65.6%) in the seven participating teams confirmed that there was a top-down management style in their institutions. Except for Japan, in which less than half of the Japanese academy (48.3%) strongly agreed and agreed that there was a top-down management style in their institutions, over half of the academy in other participating teams thought that there was a top-down management style in their institutions. These include the academy in Cambodia (65.4%), China (83.4%), Taiwan (50.2%), Malaysia (52.5%), Singapore (75.8%), and Vietnam (67.1%).

To sum up, according to system, while challenges are substantial in many aspects, this varies significantly across different participating teams. As for personal and educational profiles, there were low percentages of female academics in Cambodia, Japan and Singapore; there were low percentages of doctorate-holders in Cambodia, Vietnam and China; and it appears that there is an issue of an ageing academic population in both Taiwan and Japan. Noticeably, overall working conditions had deteriorated according to the academics from Japan and Taiwan. In

relation to governance and management, there was bad communication between management and academics in China, Taiwan, Japan and Singapore; there was a cumbersome administrative process in Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam; administrative staff did not actively support their academics' teaching in both Cambodia and Vietnam; and they did not actively support academics' research in more participating teams such as Cambodia, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam. On average, a huge majority of the respondents confirmed that there was a top-down management style in their institutions. This is especially true in the cases of China, Singapore and Vietnam.

Concluding remarks

First of all, it seems there are many variations within the academy of the participating teams. With respect to the main demographic profiles (when looking at preference for teaching or research, academics' views of overall working conditions, and administration and management), despite minor variations existing between the participating teams, two broad groups could be identified. One group includes Japan and Taiwan, while Cambodia, China, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam belong to the other group. Although detailed argument is made in this regard, the origins and traditions of national higher education, the political, social and economic contexts and the values of culture could be considered to contribute to diverse characteristics of the academy in the participating teams. This suggests that not only do the roles and functions of the academy vary across the participating systems, but also that the academy in a number of countries and systems in East and Southeast Asia has become been more diversified in many aspects.

Further, although a regional phenomenon was not fully discussed, the study explicitly suggests that not only did the academy in emerging systems (such as Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Malaysia) find itself amid a difficult process of change that will obviously have an impact on academic identities and futures, but also that the academy in matured systems like Japan, Singapore and Taiwan faced various challenges.

Finally, it is likely that while new drivers at a global level may have increasingly posed new challenges for the academy in the selected Asian higher education systems, a legacy of origins, a given culture and values, and other national contextual factors could have persistently influenced the characteristics of the academy, and influenced the challenges facing it as well.

Additionally, this study could offer several implications as follows:

For research, these include the following aspects:

- How to conduct a more comprehensive and in-depth study of the academy in much wider Asian systems with more diverse backgrounds?
- More importantly, how to link the academic outcomes to political and legal decisions which might lead to positive and healthy impacts on the changes to the academy in each system?

For policy, key challenges need to be addressed as follows:

- How to address issues related to the increasingly ageing population of the academy in Japan and Taiwan and to produce a younger generation with quality?
- How to improve the academy's overall working conditions in Japan and Taiwan during the transformation from mass higher education to a near universal access to higher education? and
- How to foster sufficient academy with high quality to meet rapidly expanding higher education systems in countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, and China?

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