

Professionalisation and higher education administration in Taiwan and Singapore: research and international offices

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study examines higher education administration (HEA) and professionalisation in Taiwan and Singapore following literature of professional service in universities and a recent policy focus in Taiwan. Exploring local contexts and perspectives on professionalism as well as professional identity, this study discusses how national regulations and internationalisation shape HEA.

Document analysis and interviews with research and international office administrators constructed the methodology of this study. Deductive coding on the documents and inductive coding on interview data were analysed thematically.

Findings demonstrate how in Taiwanese and Singaporean higher education systems, the governance, policies, and international interactions influence the administrators' work content and behaviours, and also their professional identities. Foci manifested in the administrators' views of their work demonstrated Taiwan's moral calling toward the educators and Singapore's concept of developmental state. This study further discusses how the local context and internationalisation formulate and transform the understanding of HEA professionalism.

Full paper

With discussions on professional service in higher education, topics including professionalisation (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009), identities (Caldwell, 2022; Whitchurch, 2006), and the third space within universities (Whitchurch, 2015) have brought attention to the development and capacity of the professional service staff in the higher education environment. However, there has been a lack of representation in non-Western studies. In the case of Taiwan, despite recent policy initiatives in Sustained Progress and Rise of Universities (SPROUT), challenges persist in recognising and developing the profession of higher education administration (HEA). Through legal documents, governance practice, and university administrators' experiences, this study explores the professionalisation of research and international offices. The research compares the

Confucianism-influenced Taiwanese and neoliberalism managed Singapore and conceptualises local professionalism through the lens of comparative analysis. This study ultimately aims to contribute the capacity building in HEA.

The methodology utilises document analysis and semi-structured interviews to investigate both institutional and individual perspectives. The document analysis collected 60 legal acts, ministry orders, and policy documents from Taiwan and Singapore related to higher education, and 35 interviews across four universities in the two nations were conducted. Deductive coding was applied to the document analysis with provisional codes generated from existing literature, while an inductive approach with in-vivo coding was applied to the interviews to preserve the original voices of the administrators. Using a cross-case study approach, data were analysed thematically to identify influencing factors to the development of the HEA profession.

Even with policies and funding for higher education excellence initiatives and university administration expansion, complex hiring routes and institutional hierarchy limit the development of HEA in Taiwan. Document analysis finds moral characters in many legal acts and regulations, with a similar format where the first part of the document states the aims with clear moral indications. Clear demands also appear in the act govern the 'educators', regulating the appointment "should be based on [...] morals and loyalty to the country" (Article 3, Act Governing the Appointment of Educators, 2014). Higher education administrators are positioned in two identities, not only as educators, but also as civil servants, with explicit restrictions on behaviours to follow. In particular, civil servants are deemed a higher moral character in legal acts, such as being "honest, incorruptible, cautious, and diligent" (Clause 5, Gongwu renyuan fuwu fa [Civil Servant Service Act], 2022) and obedient to their managers. Facing the complex higher education environment with ambiguous identities, many administrators struggle to recognise their professionalism or identify themselves.

The governance in Singapore applied a different approach, in contrast to the emphasis of moral characters in Taiwan. Singapore has a rare higher education system where professionals are hired as middle or sometimes senior management roles in universities, while that in neighbouring nations, such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, mostly require academics to fulfil such positions. However, its professionalism also faces limits from the legal and institutional frameworks. In particular, there is a lack of definition and context of the HEA in legal documents. The term 'higher education administration' is never mentioned and non-specific terms, such as 'employee' and 'person' are used to refer to the profession. These generalised terms, however, overlook that university employees do not have the same career ladders and appointment terms as the other academic employees in the universities. Legal documents emphasised national development over personal, and such ideology is resonated

among the university administrators, who place themselves as a part of the bigger wheel of rise and progression of nation. Their words mirror the political propaganda, that Singapore is a tiny nation without natural resources, and the only resource it has is its human resource.

Besides national-level factors, this study also highlights the importance of international higher education in shaping local concepts towards professionalism. In both Taiwan and Singapore, administrators compare their tasks and careers with industrial or international partners in the world. In Singapore, clear evidence demonstrates how interacting with administrators from abroad and understanding the international practice have strengthened Singaporean administrators' professional identities and self-recognition.

The exploration through HEA perceptions provides empirical experiences and conceptualises professionalism in Taiwan and Singapore. Challenges and opportunities remain unique in each context. In Taiwan, an overall reorganisation toward the multiple hiring routes and simplification from the current superfluous legal regulations can help provide the HEA space and flexibility to grow. In Singapore, the development of systematic training and professional certification are called for to facilitate further professionalisation. This study ultimately presents a new bottom-up perspective in understanding and facilitating the professionalisation of higher education administrator.

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