

The Shifting Boundaries of the Academic Profession: The Malaysian Professoriate in Comparative Perspective

WILLIAM G. TIERNEY
University of Southern California
wgtiern@usc.edu

Abstract. In this article, the author looks at the changing nature of academic work by analysing a survey of Malaysian faculty in public universities. The *Changing Academic Professions* project is a first attempt to delineate the opinions and backgrounds of the Malaysian professoriate. The study is part of a larger cross-national project that involves 22 nations. The article first provides literature pertaining to academic work, and then discusses the methodology for the study. The author outlines five topics yielded from the data: (1) faculty mobility, (2) faculty satisfaction, (3) teaching satisfaction, (4) faculty power, and (5) academic freedom. The article then explores the methodological problems of the data and considers how these problems might be overcome in order to provide robust information about the changing professoriate in Malaysia.

Keywords and phrases: Faculty, Academic work, University reform

INTRODUCTION

The professoriate is a dynamic profession that changes not only because different individuals inhabit faculty positions over time, but also because of what a country needs from its academic staff changes. Whereas a country may once have relied on a university to provide a pedagogic function, many postsecondary institutions are increasingly being called on to assume research and community based consulting responsibilities. Furthermore, those who hold positions also change as the mores of the culture shift. For example, men historically held the majority of academic and leadership positions in a university, but over the last generation, the number of women has increased.

The goals that a country sets for higher education are sometimes ephemeral and elusive. For example, a country may desire that the universities contribute to the advancement of democracy. It is hard to measure, however, in what ways a professor in a specific class at a specific point has contributed to a deeper understanding of a particular philosophical viewpoint in a young person's life. At the same time, many goals may have specific benchmarks that are measurable. For instance, in studying the increase of a country's scientific research capacity,

KEMANUSIAAN

one can measure whether research monies have increased in a specific institution, whether patents and copyrights have increased, and whether ties to businesses and industries have increased.

The faculty is intimately tied to virtually all the goals of the institution. Thus, an in-depth knowledge of the nation's faculty and institutions is crucial for the overall achievement of institutional goals. For example, faculty members who have not been trained to do research are unlikely to do research. If faculty members consider leaving the university because of inadequate pay or poor working conditions, then the turnover will likely retard the achievement of an institution's goals. Furthermore, a clear understanding of the opinions, working conditions, and profiles of the faculty is necessary in order to create a strategic plan that will enable the institution to achieve its goals. There is little rationale, for example, to increase salaries for academic staff if they believe that their salaries are competitive but that the climate of the institution is not conducive to doing excellent work. Simply stated, a country needs to have accurate, comparative, and timely evidence-based research that informs numerous constituencies about the changes of academic careers in as transparent a manner as possible in order to create and carry out any long-range planning.

In this article, I look at the changing nature of academic work by analysing a survey of Malaysian faculty. The *Changing Academic Professions* project is a first attempt to delineate the opinions and backgrounds of the Malaysian professoriate. The study is part of a larger cross-national project that involves 22 nations. The results from the cross-national comparisons will be analysed over the next several years. In what follows, I first offer background literature pertaining to academic work, and then I discuss the methodology of the data. Next, I outline five topics yielded from the data. I consider two concerns that exist about the data and consider how they might be overcome, concluding with three recommendations for next steps. My purpose here is entirely preliminary; this survey was the first attempt of what will be a long-term undertaking. The data do not allow for firm conclusions to be drawn about any particular topic, but they do offer a glimpse at issues that should be considered as the country, and tertiary institutions, continue to evolve and improve. The analysis focuses specifically on the public institutions within the survey insofar as they account for the vast majority of faculty and students locations.

EXAMINING ACADEMIC WORK

Academic staff are socialised in the academy in four unique ways. First, the academic profession is a unique profession. A professor, for example, is different from other professions, such as plumbers or politicians. How one acts as a

KEMANUSIAAN

professor is distinct. Second, a graduate student becomes socialised to his or her discipline or profession. How one learns to be a sociologist, for example, differs from how one learns to be an engineer. Third, universities are different from one another. Although a sociologist may be different from an engineer, they exist together on the same campus, and are presumed to be successful. How they interact with peers differs from how their confreres act at other universities. This is because campuses have unique cultures that differ from one another based on their history, tradition and administration. Fourth, the country where an academic professional works determines what it means to be an academic. Being an academic in Malaysia, for instance, is different in some way from being an academic in Vietnam, Singapore or Australia.

Sociologists such as Clark (1970, 1972) and Becher (1987) have raised the above points. Traditional anthropologists, such as Geertz (1973), also have pointed out how much socialisation differs for academics than for individuals in other professions. More recently in my own work (2008), I have investigated the various changes in academic work that are related to globalisation. Marginson and Considine (2000) have commented on the ways academic work is changing in Australia because of governmental shifts in university expectations and Rhoades (1998) has researched the ways in which academic labour is becoming more managerial.

The point of such analyses is not to argue that one type of socialisation is "good" and another is "bad," or one is "better" and the other is "worse." In other words, when analysing the academic work of sociologists and engineers, the point is to compare, contrast, and understand the differences across disciplines. The same might be said of universities. The culture of one campus is not necessarily better than that of another. They are simply different in much the same way that the culture of one particular tribe is not better than another, just different. Out of those cultural differences we might understand the different attributes that contribute to organisational effectiveness.

An additional way to understand the differences in academic work is to compare the faculty attitudes of one country with another. One might ask, "Is the academic profession attractive?", "What are the expectations of academic staff?", "Is research more valued than teaching?" and "What sorts of protections do faculty members have in terms of academic freedom?" Answers to these sorts of questions are especially useful within a comparative analysis. Academic work is currently undergoing a significant change compared to the last 50 years. If we are to chart the future rather than simply react to it, then we need to understand trends and see how these trends fit in with or are opposed to what is happening elsewhere. Accordingly, I turn now to the method employed in gathering the data in Malaysia, and then I discuss the findings from the survey.

KEMANUSIAAN

METHODOLOGY

Between May and June of 2007, 2950 questionnaires were sent to Malaysian academic staff at 17 public universities with 788 respondents. The questionnaires were written in both Malay and English to ensure the widest possible participation. The stratified random sample included the range of academic staff (e.g., professor, associate professor, lecturer, etc.), as well as faculty from different disciplines and professions (e.g., engineering, arts). Individuals of different racial groups were included. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity. The response rate for the survey was 27%, which is higher than in most such surveys. The surveys were part of the larger cross-national study, and therefore contained the same questions as those in the other studies. Insofar as this project is likely to be longitudinal, additional tasks might be undertaken to encourage a more robust analysis.

ANALYSING FACULTY WORK

Background

About 60% of the population in Malaysia is under 30 years of age, and 10% of young people between 18 and 24 years old are enrolled in universities (Perkinson 2007). In 1985, over 85,000 students attended public institutions and 20 years later the number had increased to over 300,000. In 1985, there were only 15,000 students in private colleges or universities. In 2006, that number increased to over a quarter of a million students. Whereas private institutions in 1985 accounted for just 8.9% of the total student population, private institutions had captured 45.7% of the Malaysian market by 2006. The overall number of students attending all types of postsecondary educational institutions also had more than doubled from 169,330 students in 1985 to 708,736 in 2006 (Tierney, in press).

Of course, the increase in students has presaged a remarkable growth in public and private postsecondary providers with varying purposes. In 1985, Malaysia had six public institutions, and in 2007, the country had 20 institutions. The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has designated four institutions as research universities. The Ministry wants one or two of these institutions to become "apex" universities that rank among the world's great research universities. The government's aim is to have at least one of those institutions ranked in the top 100 by 2010 (MOHE 2007).

The Lack of Mobility

Faculty in developed countries are generally mobile, moving to different institutions when better job offers develop or taking administrative positions in a different institution that enables them to move up the academic or administrative ladder. However, this is not the case with Malaysian faculty. Although a minority of respondents mentioned that they had considered taking a position elsewhere, very few had taken any steps to do so. The assumption is that the place where an individual begins his or her career is also where it will conclude.

Such a finding is important for two reasons. First, as institutions differentiate themselves from one another, one might expect greater movement between them. Research-focused faculty, for example, might be encouraged to work in research intensive institutions, though this does not appear to be the case. Second, although stability of academic staff contributes greatly to maintaining a cohesive organisational culture, it also has several drawbacks. The lack of mobility will likely make institutional self-reflection and significant intuitional changes more difficult. "New blood" enables individuals to see processes and structures in different ways. Those who have worked in an institution for their entire career are likely to fall back on the comment, "That's the way we've always done it," when asked why they do a particular task in a specific manner. To be sure, no one wants all academic staff to be moving around the country, but the lack of mobility might be a concern. A dialogue should begin about how to create incentives for faculty to move to institutions where there is a better fit for them.

An Overall Sense of Satisfaction

Faculty members are generally satisfied with their work conditions. This stands in contrast with developed countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, where faculty satisfaction with working conditions is decreasing. They pointed out that many facilities are fine (e.g., computer facilities, library, office space) and the majority of respondents were quite content in their jobs. Individuals also have stated that the working conditions have improved considerably. The findings are quite similar across the board, regardless of whether or not a person is a professor or lecturer, woman or man, Malay, Chinese or Indian.

In part, these findings are historical and comparative in nature. Those individuals who have been at the same institution for quite some time are able to reflect on the question and observe that the computer support is better than it was 10 years ago, for example. An individual who is relatively new to the institution will reflect similarly on what he or she expected from the job and whether those expectations have been met. The result is that individuals are aware of the academic environment in which they work and generally are content with it.

KEMANUSIAAN

Insofar as Malaysia has no institutions in the top 100 universities in the world should the faculty be content with their working conditions? Although a positive climate is to be applauded, one wonders if a sense of contentment allows for an atmosphere conducive to the creation and maintenance of excellence. We should expect individuals to voice concern that the working conditions are not equivalent to the best universities in the world, and/or those institutions with whom they are competing. A sense of satisfaction suggests that small changes are necessary when the Ministry and country want significant transformation. The result is that faculty perceptions appear to be at odds with the desire for change.

Teaching and the Status Quo

Most teaching occurs at the undergraduate level, and the survey suggests that there is little desire to teach doctoral students. The way in which one currently teaches is akin to the way he or she taught a decade ago. Lectures remain the norm, and distance education and computer-enhanced learning are not the main part of teaching. Although the internet has become more acceptable as a way to interact informally with students outside of the classroom, the overwhelming locale for learning in Malaysia is the university classroom. Somewhat paradoxically, the respondents also pointed out that they are given adequate encouragement and training on the methods of teaching. Because there is so little response that is negative, it is worthwhile to note that about one-third of the respondents feel that research does not reinforce teaching. Not surprisingly, over 80% of the respondents state that course grades reflect student achievement.

Four points arise from these observations. First, throughout the world, teaching and learning is more likely to undergo significant change than any other aspect of a university. In 1900, 1940, 1980 and 2000, whether a professor and student were in Malaysia, the United States, Singapore or Canada, was irrelevant with regard to how one defined the manner of pedagogy and the nature of the classroom. Professors lectured. Students took notes and final exams. In advanced classes, students participated in a seminar and wrote essays. Over time, the nature of research changed dramatically, the structure, governance and functions of postsecondary institutions expanded, and those who attended the institutions varied.

By 2020, if we continue the linear trajectory I have outlined, we will observe a sea change with regard to how one teaches, how one learns, what a classroom is, and how technology is employed. Thus, one might expect that faculty members are either eager to engage in these new methods or they fear the new methods, and in response, offer some form of resistance. It is surprising that the nature of the responses sets the stage for faculty not to be overly involved in pedagogical

changes. In other words, their vision of the future classroom will not be that different from today.

Second, because of the nature of the data, we are not able to gain a robust response from those who feel that research does not inform teaching, or if faculty at research universities desire graduate students compared to faculty at other institutions. Such findings are important. Indeed, it would be very strange if faculty members at a research university felt that their teaching was not informed by their research, and if they demonstrated little desire to have a graduate program. We know, too, that different types of institutions in other countries suggest different sorts of responses with regard to teaching and learning. At research universities, for example, the faculty members generally believe that research informs teaching, whereas in community colleges, they do not.

Third, the observation that 80% of the faculty believe that they grade fairly is a useful observation pertaining to the weakness of the data. Surely, most individuals believe they grade fairly. The more important questions are what a respondent means by "fair," if there is common agreement across an institution or system about the meaning, and whether there is some measure to test if the statement is true.

Finally, there appears to be a discrepancy between the faculty perception of the classroom and the portrayal of the classroom in the media and general population. A common complaint and concern is that students are not well prepared for the business world. Numerous reports have been issued that student communication skills are poor. However, the survey does not pick up this concern. Perhaps the faculty perception of the classroom is correct, but as stated previously, there seems to be a discrepancy with what the media, politicians and Ministry state about the needs of the graduates and the faculty.

The Concentration of Power

The respondents point out that, to a considerable degree, power lies in the hands of external agents to the university, the senior administrative staff, which is appointed by those external agents, and heads of units. Faculty members are much less represented in the governance of the institution than in other long-standing institutions in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia or France. Oftentimes, if faculty power is not significant, power often lies with the vice chancellor. However, external agents in Malaysia appear to play a much more influential role. Faculty members seem to recognise this discrepancy, with a fairly large number responding that lack of faculty involvement is a problem. Many also believe that lack of student involvement is an issue that needs to be addressed. The support for greater student voice is of interest because it is not a

KEMANUSIAAN

point heard often in countries with student activist organisations, such as Mexico, or in countries where students are well-represented on committees, such as Australia. Why faculty members voice a concern for student representation is an issue I will return to in the following section.

The analysis here offers a unique difference between Malaysia and the rest of the world in regards to the future of postsecondary education. The respondents point out that an external agent controls decision-making in a centralised manner, whereas the trend in the rest of the world, with a few exceptions like Afghanistan, is to decentralise decision-making and provide greater authority to the local unit that is in closer proximity to the decision. There may be excellent reasons for the Ministry to exert control over a system, but when compared with the ways other nations, such as Australia, have changed over the last decade, the respondents answers are of great interest. One question to ask is if the best way for the Ministry to bring about change on behalf of the citizens of the country is to "steer from a distance" as Marginson and Considine (2000) have aptly pointed out.

Agreeing Not to Disagree

When respondents were asked if the administration supports academic freedom, slightly less than half of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement. Another 300 respondents indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed. The remaining 150 respondents apparently do not feel that academic freedom is strongly supported. What is one to make of such a response? In particular, what does such a response suggest when the universities have no such statement akin to other countries in support of open and free speech? Parenthetically, one wonders how an administrator can support something that does not exist. As with all surveys, how a respondent answers a question lies in large part in the way he or she interprets the question and chooses to respond. When compared with similar questions (i.e., questions on faculty involvement, student voice and administrative competence), the number of low scores and middle scores are not particularly different.

However, from a comparative perspective, such a response should be cause for alarm. In countries where academic freedom and faculty autonomy are seen as central tenants of academic life, the significant percentage of faculty that do not believe academic freedom is supported is a major issue with regard to the everyday and long-term health of the institution. Indeed, the answers bring into question the veracity of the data, to which I now turn.

DISCUSSION

In what follows, I touch on five issues that need to be considered with regard to the data. I first mention two methodological concerns, and then turn to a discussion of three points that will strengthen comparative work as scholars move forward in this intellectual arena.

Low Response Rates and Small Cell Sizes

The response rate in public institutions was 27%, which makes it very difficult to reach any firm conclusions. In addition, because the response rate was low and the breadth was significant with regard to institutions and faculty types, the cell size of certain groups were particularly small. As a result, very little can be said about differences across groups, which is unfortunate. When one thinks about academic life, the following categories generally reveal a great deal:

- Discipline
- Institution
- Academic Rank
- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity

Although other categories may be of interest as well, these five categories help frame the ways different groups react to different issues and challenges. One expects, for example, that faculty at a research university will have a different perspective on the importance of research or graduate education than faculty at a comprehensive or teaching institution. Generally, senior professors are more satisfied than their younger colleagues, but they may also expect to have a greater say in the decision-making of the institution. Faculty in the sciences and medicine are likely to have a different viewpoint from their colleagues in the social sciences about the research infrastructure of the institution.

Other factors also intersect with one another. Women working in the sciences in developed countries, for example, have concerns about academic work during their child-bearing years. From interviews I have done, this does not seem to be the case in Malaysia where the extended family is larger and wages allow for childcare. Racial and ethnic discrimination in society logically carries over into tertiary organisations, so minority faculty are generally less satisfied than their majority counterparts, whether they are in a research or comprehensive institution, in a social or natural science, male or female.

KEMANUSIAAN

Such findings are important for decision-makers at the national and institutional level. If a particular group is at variance with the norm, then measures might be taken to address the concern. However, because of the meagre response rate, the cell sizes are too small to present any significant differences. Consequently, we are unable to use the data in a manner that might be useful to policy makers as it pertains to specific groups.

Veracity and Response Rates

Many of the questions asked in the survey could be considered sensitive. To be sure, asking if someone is at a public or private institution, or what rank a person holds is not of particular consequence for a respondent regardless of where he or she works or lives. But what of questions that ask about the working conditions of the institution, the leadership of the administration, the restrictions on academic research, or the perceptions about the quality of academic life in Malaysia? I have a concern that the meaning of the data remains obscure without some complementary method such as interviews.

One does not know, for example, why 73% of the survey respondents chose not to answer the survey. If 73% of the potential respondents were too busy, or the survey was too cumbersome, then those issues should be dealt with in future surveys. If, however, individuals are afraid to respond for fear that their responses might endanger their employment and pension, then that is an entirely different matter. The same issue, of course, exists with regard to how the respondents answered different questions. The assumption is that, other than vanity, respondents would find very little reason to misrepresent their age or length of service. However, sensitive questions about working conditions or what role faculty should have in decision-making might prompt the respondent to answer in a manner that would raise no potential problems should his or her identity be discovered. Such issues are standard problems of validity and reliability, and as with any research project, the worth of the undertaking will always be suspect until they are solved.

Administer a Faculty Survey Every Four Years

As Malaysian higher education continues to improve, there will be a continuing need for data on faculty and instructors (i.e., persons who directly affect the quality of education in postsecondary institutions). Faculty members remain the central resource for the outcomes of postsecondary education. Faculty members have multiple responsibilities and those tasks are likely to continue to evolve and increase. Thus, the country needs to know who they are, how they are changing, what they do, and what they perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of their

institutions. Accordingly, a study needs to be designed to provide data about faculty to tertiary educational researchers, administrators and policy makers.

Because changes in faculty work habits and in the personnel are not significant from year to year, a comprehensive study every four years is preferable. The study, however, will demand a year's worth of preparation and analysis, and involve a significant amount of cost in order to yield valid and reliable data. I would begin by focusing on public institutions because they hold the largest number of academic staff in Malaysia.

Encourage Institutional Surveys Every Four Years

The strength of a national survey is that response rates will be analysed from a wide variety of institutions. The weakness of such a survey is that questions specific to a particular institution will not be acquired. Although a national survey will be of use to campus administrators, an institutional survey also can be of enormous benefit for those administrators who adhere to evidence-based decision-making. I would encourage the development and implementation of a campus based survey in the years when the national survey is not being conducted. The same lead-time and post-analysis will be necessary. The questions will be different from the national survey and will provide institutional decision-makers a great deal of information on which to base decisions about academic work. As the country moves toward greater autonomy for each campus, such information will be crucial. Thus, every two years, faculty will complete either an institutional or national survey.

Compliment the Surveys with Qualitative Interviews

One way to improve interpretation of the data is to buttress the surveys with interviews that focus on specific subgroups, such as early career faculty or faculty in the sciences. Insofar as we have a legitimate concern about the trustworthiness of the data, it stands to reason that anonymous confidential interviews will yield a bountiful amount of data to support and explain the data generated from the survey. Furthermore, interviews will help solve certain puzzles that might be found. For example, the previous point regarding women in science being able to afford childcare came from interviews I have conducted. Several interviewees explained the finding that faculty are concerned about student participation in governance with regard to the curtailment of student voice. Although analysts of a survey may be able to provide their own interpretations of a finding, a more trustworthy approach is to develop a standard interview protocol and interview respondents.

KEMANUSIAAN

If these recommendations are implemented, there is considerable potential for learning a great deal of information that might be employed in improving the working conditions and quality of the faculty in Malaysia. The challenge will be in allocating the necessary resources and providing an adequate amount of time to conduct and analyse the survey.

REFERENCES

- Becher, T. 1987. The disciplinary shaping of the profession. In *The academic profession: National, disciplinary, and institutional settings*, ed. B. Clark, 165–198. Berkeley: University of California Press
- Clark, B. R. 1970. *The distinctive college*. Chicago: Aldine.
- _____. 1972. The organizational saga in higher education. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17(2): 178–184.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). 2007. *National higher education action plan 2007–2010*. <http://www.mohe.gov.my/transformasi/> (accessed June 5, 2008).
- Marginson, S. and Considine, M. 2000. *The enterprise university: Power, governance, and reinvention in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Perkinson, R. 2007. Public and private higher education: A growing global enterprise. In *The Europa world of learning* (57th ed.), ed. A. Gladman. Oxford: Routledge.
- Rhoades, G. 1998. *Managed professionals: Unionized faculty and restructuring academic labor*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tierney, W. G. 2008. *The impact of culture on organizational decision-making: Theory and practice in higher education*. Sterling: Stylus.
- _____. In press. Forms of privatization: Globalization and the changing nature of tertiary education., In *Globalization and tertiary education in the Asia Pacific: The changing nature of a dynamic market*, ed. Christopher Findlay and William G. Tierney. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.