

Academic Talent Management in Hong Kong and Japan

The strength of an organisation mainly lies in its human resource. The strength of a university, hence, mainly lies in its academics. They are the key players in the institution's primary mission of knowledge advancement (Rowley, 1996). Therefore, as higher education in Asia continues to expand, managing its academic talent is vital. Though promotion and talent development are not the only drivers for good academic performance, they remain among the top motivators (Abejirinde, 2009; Tien, 2000). This article touches on four components of talent management for the universities in Hong Kong and Japan: recruitment, confirmation or tenure, appraisal, and promotion.

Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, there is no policy impeding academic talent recruitment from abroad and no hiring favour towards locals or foreigners alike (Chao & Postiglione, 2017). Recruitment and promotion are based on merit. Having moved away from the British system, Hong Kong follows the academic ranking of assistant professor, associate professor, and professor (i.e., the American structure). The lecturer and teaching fellow are not part of the academic track; they are assumed by PhD candidates and graduates focused exclusively on teaching. A doctoral degree is required for the post of assistant professor whose activities centre entirely on research. Academic personnel are generally engaged under an initial three-year contract with an ending gratuity. After six years from appointment, substantiation (tenure) is necessary.

As such, assistant professors are appointed up to a maximum of six to seven years before being expected to move up to associate professor. Advancement to professor requires scholarly achievements of global repute. Most of the University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded institutions carry out performance appraisal annually entailing peer and external review and key performance indicators. Officially, the assessment proportion is 40, 40, and 20 for teaching, research, and service respectively. The promotion exercise involves a three-tier evaluation: department, faculty, and institution. Hong Kong's system features grievance procedures enabling the attainment of review documents and appeal.

Japan

Faculty arrangements are fairly similar in Japan (see Mochizuki, 2017). Permanent employments are scarce at public universities as the one-to-five years academic contract was ushered in by the Act Regarding the Limited Term Appointment of University Teaching Personnel. Assistant lecturers mostly hold the aforesaid contracts without tenure. Advancement to the next rank (to lecturer, then associate professor, then full professor) is expected upon contract expiry. The following appointment may be permanent and tenured or still contractual and untenured. Such is the case for promotions to lecturer and associate professor. The post of full professor, though, is usually tenured. To qualify for professorship from associate professor, a doctoral degree is mandatory. Most universities apply a faculty assessment system for appraisal and promotion. Research, teaching, institution administration service, and societal contribution are the formal evaluation criteria.

Assessment and Promotion Matters

For the top universities of Hong Kong and Japan, though assessment involves a number of criteria, one factor holds superior above all others: Research output. Publications, grants, and patents bear such weight to the extent that, not only promotion, but employment (contract renewal or termination) is dependent almost entirely upon these. Young scholars are consequently pressed to minimise attention on teaching in favour of securing research yields. Chao and Postiglione (2017) revealed that highly stressful and competitive environments are prevalent at these institutions. As is evident, Japan and Hong Kong are very alike in their academic climate.

Both also share the issue of gender imbalance — too few female faculty members in their universities, especially at the higher ranks like the professoriate.

One of the main similarities that contribute to their academic climate is the extensive autonomy their universities hold in determining their systems and operations. Decisions on university matters are not centralised at the government unit. Staff at Hong Kong and Japanese universities are not civil servants; their income is not bound by the state's pay scheme. Institutions administer their own criteria and procedures for recruitment and promotion as well as salary scales. Their offered remuneration is, thus, internationally competitive, drawing in the best talents around the globe. Making up for their subordinate positions, Hong Kong's lower ranked UGC-funded universities often extend even more robust compensation packages.

Nonetheless, amidst the common academic landscape and processes in both countries, there too lie many differences. A notable distinction is the final authority of the promotion practice. For UGC-supported universities in Hong Kong, the mentioned three-tier procedure starts from recommendations by the departmental search committee to the faculty/school committee, then finally to the university committee. At the university committee for most institutions, the vice-president for academic affairs makes the concluding decision for the associate professor post and the president for professor.

The flow for Japanese universities progresses from the personnel committee to the faculty council, then to the president. The final decision for all academic positions from lecturer to full professor rests with the president. And with the amendment to Article 93 of the School Education Act, the president is able to make appointments irrespective of the faculty council's nominations. This amendment weakens the comprehensive voice of the relevant lecturers, associate professors, and full professors (for they are the composition of the faculty council). Mochizuki (2017) cautioned on the disposition towards an autocratic setting controlled by the president and the inevitable loss of academic freedom.

Conclusion

Undeniably, the extreme emphasis on research output in Japan and Hong Kong occurs chiefly among their research-intensive universities. Nevertheless, those are the institutions that are held in the highest regard and categorised accordingly. The international university rankings play a substantial role in perpetuating this setting. Publication especially measures among the most significant in the ranking metrics (UNESCO, 2014). This excessive focus on research is, hence, not exclusive to the academe of Hong Kong and Japan. An upcoming piece, this time on Asia's developing nations, will likely illustrate the typical trend of this issue for most countries worldwide, albeit to different degrees of gravity.

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