

Chapter 1.3

Research Managers and Administrators in Asia: History and Future Expectations

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Abstract

Historically, academia, typically universities have had two major groups of professionals. One is those who are responsible for teaching and research, including university professors, associate professors, researchers, research assistants, etc. The other is the administrative staff who are responsible for administrative tasks. Both groups have existed since the inception of a university.

As societal expectations of universities have evolved, so has the need for professionals with advanced skills, who are often referred to as Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) or University Research Administrators (URAs). In Japan, the profession is called URA because it was modelled after the American system in the beginning of its formation. In India, on the other hand, it is often referred to as RMA because of its reference to the United Kingdom. In this chapter, we will use the term RMA as a consistent term. In Asia, the trend of increasing need for this profession has been increasing over the past decade, starting around the 2010s.

This section provides an overview of the history and background that resulted in the current situation surrounding RMAs, as well as a future prospect in

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the six Asian countries featured in this book: China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam.

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Background: The Rise of New Professions in Asia

Since the turn of the 21st century, universities have been expected to be a source of innovation. This trend is largely influenced by the social environment surrounding universities. As a global trend, universities have been expected to contribute to society in addition to their traditional functions of education and research in recent years (Ueyama, 2010). These expectations then strengthen the capacity of universities to obtain public competitive funding, commercialise university technologies, and support start-up companies.

The increase in competitive funding affects universities in both positive and negative ways. On the positive side, the budget available for conducting research will be diverse. For example, research budgets will be available for a variety of research purposes, such as academic research, research and development in industry–academia collaboration, prototype manufacturing for start-up creation, and so on. On the other hand, this trend also increases some costs, such as invention management procedures, adaptation to different accounting rules, and complex contracts with multiple stakeholders (Altbach & Umakoshi, 2004; Amano, 2002).

The trend towards commercialisation of technologies born out of university research also has a significant impact. Universities are expected not only to publish research results in the form of academic papers, but also to collaborate with industry and start-up companies on intellectual property, licencing, coordination of joint research, and negotiations in obtaining compensation for intellectual property. In addition to researchers and administrative staff, more specialists are being trained at higher education institutions. While there are some common trends observed among the history of RMA as a profession in Asian countries, each country's circumstances also have a significant influence on expectations surrounding RMAs.

From a macro perspective, one cannot ignore the extent of the relationship between a country's economy, science, and technology. Society's expectations of academia are naturally higher when the economy is fundamentally dependent on science and technology. This expectation may be represented, for example, by the share of R&D investment in GDP. Expectations may also vary depending on the size of the academic sector and its history in modern times. Looking at the six countries from this perspective –China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam – there is a great deal of diversity, and this also influences the attributes and responsibilities of RMA personnel in each country.

The Formation of a Community Behind the Establishment of a Profession

Although RMAs in Asia have developed in a diverse manner, there are commonalities in the process of how it became a profession in China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Most commonly, there are education and training programs

and professional community-building activities that can be observed across individual organisations. Both activities are essential to develop new professionals in the university, promote research support, and improve the overall attractiveness of the profession.

Education and Training Programmes

In all countries, the initial impetus for the start of activities seems to have come from the corporatist learning sessions held by volunteer practitioners. As a result, there are few official records of these budding grassroots activities. For example, in Japan, the first such event was a study group held in 2009 at the initiative of several practitioners who were practicing at a research university and who were acquainted with each other. This was two years before the inauguration of a large-scale project introduced under the policy of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).¹ Since then, an annual two-day conference² was introduced every year, along with regular training for newcomers. In Singapore, at Nanyang Technological University (NTU),³ which boasts an emerging status among the world's leading research institutions, study groups for practitioners within the university are now a leading activity. In India, with support from the Wellcome Trust, an annual conference has been launched and its attendance has been increasing year by year. The situation is similar in Malaysia, where the starting point is a meeting of practitioners. On the other hand, the launch of the activities in China and Vietnam recognises the necessity and leadership by the government.

Formation of Communities

When voluntary study groups start to meet on a regular basis, the foundation of the organisation gradually becomes more stable. When there are nation-wide opportunities to gather beyond an institution (e.g. regular congresses), there is a growing demand for the establishment of an organisational body to act as a hub and operating body for these events.

Japan might serve as a primary example of how the community of RMAs gets built in the Asian countries. A voluntary study group among the practitioners in Japan first met in 2009, which grew into an association with a legal entity in 2015.

Among the Asian countries represented in this handbook, Malaysia established a similar organisational body in 2019. In India, there has been a movement to form a national community for practitioners in the form of feasibility study activities such as IRMI⁴ with the support of the Wellcome Trust (Ayyar & Jameel, 2019). Under the leadership of NTU and with the backing of the nearby Australian community ARMS,⁵ Singapore is also in the process of forming a national community. The diversity of Asian countries is evident in several aspects during this chapter, and this process is one of the examples, China and Vietnam are following a slightly different process. In China, a network of practitioners in research institutes related to national science and technology policy has been established, with the professions responsible for the relevant practices being networked. Various data provide an overview of these practitioners, and their activities are happening in a relatively top-down manner.

¹https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/jinzai/ura/detail/1315871.htm

²<https://www.rman.jp/event/>

³<https://www.ntu.edu.sg/index>

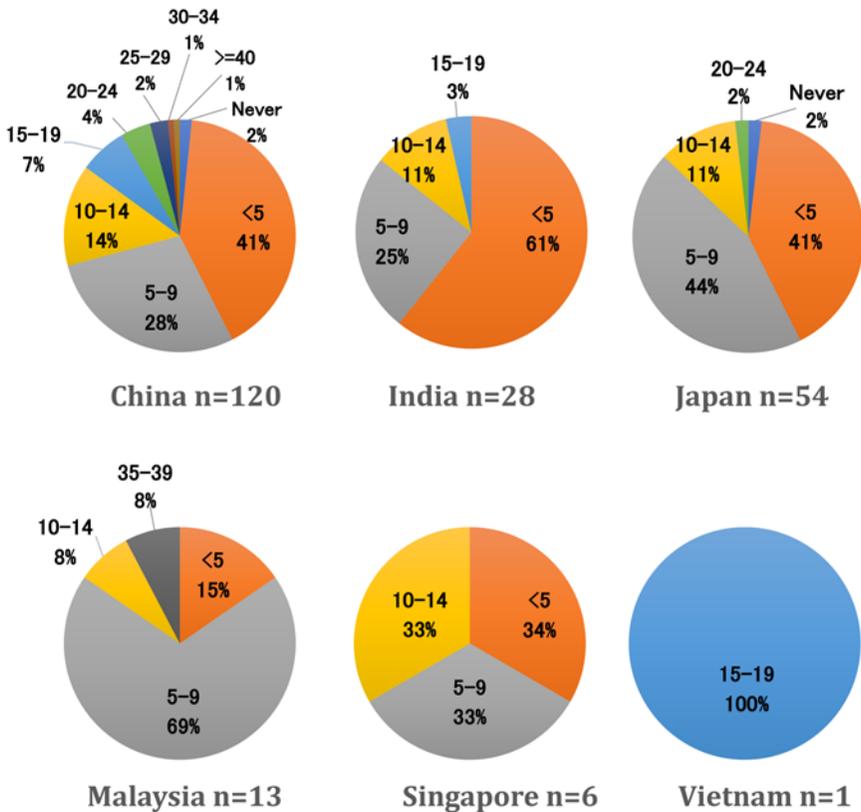
⁴<https://www.indiaalliance.org/india-research-management-initiative>

⁵<https://www.researchmanagement.org.au>

The importance of the profession in Vietnam has also been recognised from the perspective of promoting science and technology policy and has begun to spread.

The Realities of Current Practitioners

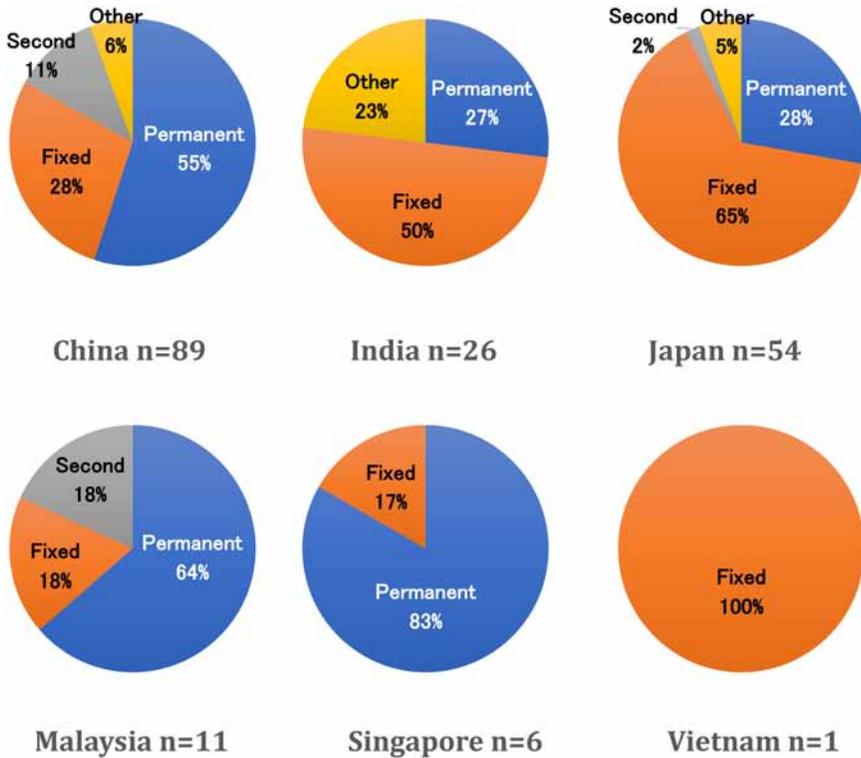
Because the RMA history in the Asian region is not as long-lived as compared to Europe and the United States, there is not a wealth of exhaustive data that informs the situation in each country. In this context, data from the large-scale international survey Research Administration as a Profession (RAAAP), conducted within the framework of INORMS (International Network of Research Management Societies), is useful. This section presents the age range and years of experience of RMA practitioners in the six case study countries, based on the preliminary results of the 2022 iteration (Kerridge, Dutta, et al., 2022). Several things should be noted for understanding the low response rate among RMAs in the Asian region. First, the RAAAP survey was distributed through national networks, however, there are not many formal associations in Asia to begin with. Second, the survey was conducted in English, which is not the primary language used among many RMA practitioners in Asia.



Approx Years (Banded) as a Research Administrator

- Never, <5, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, >=40

Fig. 1.3.1. Experience Years as RMAs in Asia.



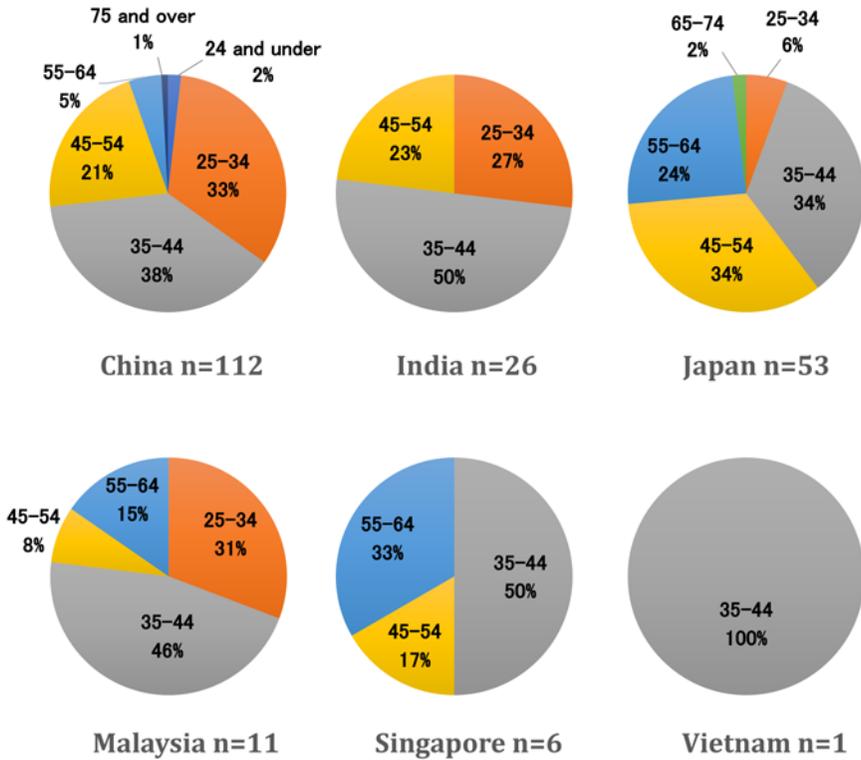
Employment Type
 • Permanent, Fixed, Second, Other

Fig. 1.3.2. Employment Type of RMAs in Asia.

Fig. 1.3.1 shows the distribution of years of experience among RMAs in Asia. Overall, the majority of RMAs have less than 10 years’ work experience. Japan and Malaysia had the largest proportion of respondents with less than 10 years’ experience, followed by China, India, and Singapore. The largest group of RMAs has between 5 and 10 years’ experience in Japan and Malaysia, while the majority in China and India have less than 5 years’ experience. There are also veterans with more than 30 years’ experience in some countries. In all countries, 15%–20% of the respondents have been working as RMAs for more than 30 years, indicating that some of them have been working as RMAs (with another job title) even before RMA networks and communities came into existence. The only respondent for Vietnam has 15 years of experience.

The survey asked what form of employment RMAs had, with four options: Permanent, Fixed, Secondment,⁶ and Other. The result is shown in Fig. 1.3.2. Although the employment arrangement differs from country to country, Permanent is generally regarded as a lifetime employment, which ensures stable conditions of employment.

⁶Secondment indicates a person who has a temporary position, other than their main role (perhaps on a project of some kind) but will return to their substantive role at the end of the secondment period.



Age Range

- 24 and under, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, 75 and over

Fig. 1.3.3. Age Range of RMAs in Asia.

The existence of permanent jobs can also be seen as an expectation that the job is valued in the organisation and that the job will be held for a long time. Looking at the position of six countries, five have permanent positions, with the majority in China, Malaysia, and Singapore. Permanent and fixed positions together represent the majority in all six countries. In addition, Secondments are likely to be those RMAs who concurrently have another job. They are present in certain numbers in China, Japan, and Malaysia. It may be that RMA as a profession is still a relatively new occupation and some are also working as teachers and researchers.

Fig. 1.3.3 shows the age distribution of RMAs working in Asia. In China, India, and Malaysia, the majority of workers are young, aged 44 and under; they account for approximately three-quarters of the total. Singapore has about half, while Japan has one-third. Conversely, China, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore have RMAs who are over 55; in Japan and Singapore, they are ranging from one-quarter to one-third. This shows that there is a wide range of age diversity, although most are young but almost no RMAs under 25.

It should be noted that the age distribution needs to be viewed in conjunction with the average age of the country. Among the Asian countries, Japan has by far the highest average age with 48.6 years, followed by China, 38.8 years; Malaysia, 29.2 years;

India, 28.1 years; Singapore, 39.7 years; and Vietnam, 31.4 years (World Population Review 2022⁷). On this basis, it can be seen that in Japan and China, this work is engaged in by a relatively large number of younger age groups. On the other hand, in Malaysia, India, Singapore, and Vietnam, relatively older age groups are engaged in this work when the average age is in consideration.

From the above overview, it can be understood that RMAs in Asia is a relatively new profession, and the RAAAP-3 survey data show that the progress is currently ongoing to become established as a new profession in universities. This process is supported the hypothesis to provide meaningful lessons for the regions where RMA positions will develop in the future.

What Is Needed to Establish a New Profession

In Asian countries, research management and administration is a new profession, which is expanding over the last decade. The factors behind this growth include both the increased investment in science and technology due to the rapid economic growth in Asia, and the growing need for higher education institutions due to a growing younger population in this region. For these reasons, academic research in Asian countries is expected to develop at a higher level. At the same time, the need for research management in Asian universities has increased both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The following two perspectives are therefore important for establishing the retention and diffusion of the new profession. First, it is vital to know what skills they have, how they are treated, and how their responsibilities are balanced with the existing staff to ensure their retention in the organisation. Second, the specific measures to successfully achieve this will depend on the positionality of the university within each country as well as the differences in the culture surrounding job selection and employment. In other words, it is important to establish the core competence of the profession.

Lastly, we will discuss the future vision of RMA in Asia, focussing on (1) the recognition of skill sets, and (2) the Asian Network, both of which are beneficial for the future development of the profession's establishment.

Common Recognition of Skills

In Asian countries with a relatively short RMA history compared to the West, discussions on skills standardisation are still in their infancy. In Japan, skill standards have been developed over the years. Professionals started to play an active role, and it became common to capture their work experience and performance. This is a successful example of a system that combined the top-down policies and bottom-up activities, being modelled after the preceding technology transfer professionals. The situation in Japan may provide inspiration for future research management systems in other Asian countries.

As detailed in the chapters for each country, education and training programs have been implemented at the request of practitioners. In addition, the work of RMAs is not simply limited to pre-award and post-award activities. For example, in Japan, RMA work also includes the identification of research potential through institutional research, technology transfer, intellectual property management, and public relations activities. It is expected that the accumulation of education and training programs conducted in various countries will likely enable the overall systemisation of the skills and knowledge.

⁷<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/median-age>

Asian Network

As of 2022, in China, Singapore, Malaysia, India, and Japan, there are activities that bring together practitioners on a regular basis. However, there is no international association that oversees all Asian regions, like EARMA in Europe. Instead, connections among key players in the Asian region have been expanding through participation in global initiatives such as INORMS, and those whose membership is internationally such as ARMS, EARMA, NCURA, and SRAI.

In 2021, the INORMS 2021 Hiroshima Congress was held for the first time in Asia. Although it had been postponed for a year by COVID-19 and was held fully online, more than 100 participants from Asia, including China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam and Korea participated. The cross-national participation indicated that networking among RMAs in the Asian region will likely become possible in the future, harnessing networking opportunities provided for example through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN),⁸ an initiative of Kyoto University⁹ in Japan.

Final Thoughts

An important perspective for understanding the situation of RMAs in the Asian region is the highly independence of higher education systems. Each country has its own university system, with its own curricula, many in its own language and relatively little mutual compatibility. It may be partly due to the absence of a system such as the Bologna Process (1999)¹⁰ in Europe. It may also be related to the lack of a large funding system to promote collaboration, such as the Horizon Europe,¹¹ where researchers from two or more countries work together to apply for research funding.

In order to jointly acquire funds and smoothly conduct joint research, it is necessary to deepen mutual understanding of each country's system, such as budget system, ownership of intellectual property, conflict of interest management, and other various rules. Ideally, common budget fiscal year and currency would further reduce administrative costs and promote more efficient use of resources. In this context, a better understanding of each country's RMAs with respect to each other would contribute significantly to promote research more active and innovative. To this end, it is desirable that networking in the Asian region become more active and more widespread.

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⁸<https://asean.org>

⁹<https://www.kura.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/about/>

¹⁰<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/bih-higher-education/bologna-process.html>

¹¹https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en

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