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When state centralism meets neo-liberalism: managing university governance change in Singapore and Malaysia

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Abstract

With strong intention to enhance the global competitiveness of their university systems, both the Singapore and Malaysia governments have introduced reforms along the lines of ideas and practices embedded in neo-liberalism. In the last decade or so, we have witnessed reforms being introduced to the higher education sectors in these Asian states, particularly when corporatization and incorporation strategies are adopted to transform national/public universities. With particular reference to how academics evaluate the impact of the reforms on their academic life, this article reports and analyses findings generated from campus visits and field interviews conducted in Singapore and Malaysia from 2007 to 2009. Although the senior management of corporatized/incorporated universities in these Asian states has been given more discretion to decide how to operate their universities, most of the front line academics that we interviewed have not experienced major differences in university governance after the reforms took place. Instead of feeling 'emancipated' and 'empowered', many

02.6.2026

academics feel more pressures and control from the university administration and government ministries. Despite the fact that both the Singapore and Malaysia governments have tried to embrace the ideas and practices of 'neo-liberalism' to transform university governance, academics still see the state's reluctance in withdrawing from steering/controlling higher education development. Such observations clearly reflect the 'clash' of two major governance philosophies, namely, 'state centralism' and 'neo-liberalism'. In short, this article critically examines how far the proposed university governance reforms by adopting the corporatization/incorporation strategies have actually transformed university management and academic life style in Singapore and Malaysia. (HRK / Abstract übernommen) Mok, Ka Ho, E-Mail: kahomok@ied.edu.hk