
International Higher Education in Thailand: Challenges within a Changing Context

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Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to examine the five core problems facing international higher education in Thailand in the twenty first century. While many other Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states continue to outpace Thailand in terms of growth and quality in higher education, Thailand struggles with demographics, quality attainment, diploma disease, internationalization and sociocultural issues which inhibit growth and standards within the international system. Given the rising importance of English proficiency and thus English education in ASEAN and the integration of the global workforce, Thailand is in a unique position both geographically and socially to capitalize on changes in regional employment and development. Therefore, this article discusses the causes of the problems in international higher education and offers potential solutions to ameliorate the negative impacts. The potential contribution of this article lies in its aim to elevate the discussion regarding international higher education trends within ASEAN.*

Keywords: *International Education, Thailand, Quality University, English*

1. Introduction to International Higher Education in Thailand

The cost of international education in Thailand limits access to the wealthy and upper middle class (Surichai, 2002). The inequality of access

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to international higher education further continues the cycle of income disparity and widens the wealth gap. International education opportunities are only provided for those who have the financial means to cover the burden of an international tuition. Historically, Thais with means were either educated abroad or within the royal court system where courses were often taught in English. However those without means often received apprenticeships, monastic based education or vocational training. Thai higher education began to change in the nineteenth century due to the presence of colonial powers and the greatly increased speed of modernization within the Thai nation state. The university system was a product of the palace and religion which was tasked with educating the progeny of the aristocracy for administrative positions and civil service. The impetus of Thai higher education was not founded on the concept of knowledge creation and Thai higher education continues to toil with western concepts of academia and the roles and responsibilities of higher education from a western perspective (Sinlarat, 2004). In the latter half of the 20th century, Thai higher education transitioned from an elitist system to a mass based system (Shiller & Liefner, 2006).

Presently, global higher education is modeled on American and other Western models which are based on accessibility, accountability and decentralization (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Ramirez, 2003). Following this trend, Thailand began higher education reformation in the 1990s and this process continues to date. However, even prior to the 1990s, there was a gradual shift towards private higher education in Thailand. In 1969 the Private College Act allowed six private higher education institutions to use the word “college” and slowly allowed these schools to shift from associates degrees to bachelor’s degrees (Boonprasert, 2002). Yet it was in the 1990s when Thailand saw rapid growth in the number of private higher education programs. There are a number of potential factors which could account for this. Perhaps this was due to the 1992 coup d’etat, the 1995 general election , the 1997 Asian financial collapse, the 1998 Student Loans Act or the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra or a combination of all the above. Between 1991-

2001, the number of private higher education institutions rose from 25 to 51 (Praphamontripong, 2010) and continued the upward trend in the beginning of the 21st century. Another reason for this event may have been the dissatisfaction with Thai public universities and the limited number of seats available for a society which was eager to enter higher education. International higher education in Thailand is classified as a degree granting institution whereby all courses and materials are presented in the English language. International HE programs in Thailand do not require potential students take the national entrance examination (O-NET/ A-NET). Instead, the international HE programs often rely on high school graduation certificates or the equivalent (GED certificate) as well as the SAT or O-Level/A-Level scores with an IELTS or TOEFL score which indicates proficiency in English. Following the submission of all of the above, potential students are then required to sit the individual institutions entrance examination to ensure potential candidates have the requisite skills to enter the program. Thai language skills are not required for entry nor is there any requirement to study Thai language or Thai history. Essentially, international HE is a Western based English language program within the Thai HE system. Graduates from these programs are well placed to enter postgraduate education in Western programs or to enroll in postgraduate international programs within Thailand. For this reason international HE saw enrollment increase rapidly during the economic expansion of the 1990s and early 2000s. (Mounier and Tangchuang, 2010) Indeed, since the economic collapse of 1997 international higher education in Thailand has grown dramatically and most of the leading universities and higher education institutions now have established international programs. Given the governments' five-year national development plan which expects higher education to drive economic growth, there has been rapid development within this educational sector. This article outlines a selection of five core challenges Thai international higher education faces at present.

2. Population Changes

The first challenge international higher education in Thailand faces is related to population declines and the number of open seats in classrooms. For much of the twentieth century Thai higher education was focused on the quantitative aspect of educational provisioning (Rhein, 2016). However, as an aging population, Thailand is experiencing a decline in fertility rates. This decline is commonly seen as nations become more developed. While the enrolment ratio of students in Thai higher education is on the rise, the total number of annual enrollments has fallen due to changes in the population rates of school aged children. For instance, the Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy, an office within the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) reported that in 2013 there were 2,298,000 students enrolled in higher education institutions whereas in 2015 enrollment had dropped to 2,025,000 (OHEC, 2016). This is a decline of 273,000 seats or a 12% drop from the 2013 numbers. This gradual decline will have an impact on budgets and course offerings. It is foreseeable that enrollment statistics will continue to decline as population growth rates continue to decline. Therefore, in the long term, if the present rate growth continues, Thai higher education may face a similar problem to that currently being experienced in Japan. It is estimated that Japan has an oversupply of 200 universities due to a declining student population, so existing institutions are desperate for students and are lowering their standards (Stewart, 2016). Thailand cannot afford to lower its standards in order to attract more students. The majority of tertiary students in Thailand attend Thai programs (OHEC, 2016) which are more affordable and often more prestigious. Given the expense associated with international programs, stakeholders are often left to consider the tradeoffs of studying abroad, investing in the pricey international programs or attending Thai language degree programs. As annual enrollments continue to decrease many students will find it easier to gain access to these once limited prestigious programs, thus decreasing enrollment within the international colleges. A potential solution to the current demographic challenge can be found in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) economic and educational mission. International

programs in ASEAN would benefit from greater cooperation and mutual trust. Allowing students a choice of compatible international tertiary education with curriculums, grades and academic qualifications which are recognized regionally would facilitate greater inbound student flows and bolster cross border educational opportunities, both in terms of research and study opportunities. The promotion of student mobility within ASEAN would lead to greater cultural exchanges and regional harmonization. As the comparability and compatibility of education grew, the global student flows would follow thus creating a regional space for higher education. To complete this task greater collaboration is necessary among ASEAN organizations such as the ASEAN University Network (AUN), the ASEAN Secretariat and SEAMEO.

3. Quality Concerns

The necessity for Thailand to compete internationally is based on the creation of quality graduates. For much of the twentieth century Thailand was focused on the quantity aspects of providing education to the masses. Yet in the twenty first century quality has taken precedence. Thai higher education must aim to create an educated workforce with the ability to think critically, solve problems and participate in the international community. However, Thai higher education has not met the international standard and continues to be out paced by its regional neighbors. According to the 2014-15 World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report, Thai educational standards continue to decline (WEF, 2015). The report indicates that Thai universities ranked 8th out of 10 ASEAN nations. The university rankings completed by QS World University survey bear similar results. Further evidence of the decline of educational quality can be found in the 2015 OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) which found a reduction in science, math and reading scores. The PISA report outlined other ASEAN nations and concluded that Thai students are vastly underperforming. For instance, it was found that Thai students ranked fifty fourth in math and science scores among the seventy nations surveyed (OECD, 2015). There is also a large quantity of social science graduates and

a lack of graduates with science, technology, engineering and math skills (Weesakul & Associates, 2004; Rachapaetayakom, 2005). A quality assurance system was implemented to address these structural issues yet this degree of documentation merely demands more effort from the already overworked and underpaid faculty (Lao, 2015). Essentially Thai higher education continues to focus on the marketability of curriculums based on the potential financial stability of individual programs as opposed to a nationally led agenda. The needs of the labor market are not being met as higher education programs prefer to focus on the more popular student friendly courses. This is a matter of survival from the universities perspective as offering a high level math or engineering program does not garner nearly the same levels of student interest as an entrepreneurship or media design program. The majority (60%) of students in Thai higher education study social sciences, business and law (Tangchuang, 2011). As the interests and motivations of students is much different from that of the industry (Buasuwan & Jones 2016), universities continue to see students as customers in a buyers' market, thus the problems of meeting national labor demands will continue unabated. This incongruity between Thai higher education and the labor market needs to be addressed for continued national interests. As ASEAN economies continue to rise, it will become a social imperative to transition from a manufacturing state sustained on cheap uneducated labor to a more creative and technologically advanced knowledge based economy. To further exacerbate the quality issue is the recent grade inflation trend. Thai higher education is not immune to the global grade inflation phenomena. The quality of student competence is not accurately measured by contemporary grade distribution. Thai education systems should be complemented for their rapid expansion in the twentieth century and sheer quantity of students the system processed. From a quantity of student's perspective, Thailand has achieved much; yet from a quality of student's perspective, there is still much to be achieved. Previous research confirms that Thai students spend more time in the classroom compared with students of other countries, yet the PISA scores and other international assessments do not bode well for the Thai education system (Tangkitvanich

& Sasiwuttiwat, 2012). This is not a financial issue as the Thai education budget has increased dramatically in the past fifteen years, yet Thai student performance is declining in spite of the doubled education budget (Tangkitvanich & Sasiwuttiwat, 2012).

The Thai higher education system is in some ways a victim of its' own history in that the culture of Confucianism and various other venerable religious traditions often hinder educational development and implementation of new pedagogy. Many Thai teachers and students prefer teacher centered learning environments where students are given the answers and the primary focus is rote learning models (Rhein, 2013). Given the sociocultural diversity in ASEAN, the debate between striking a balance of local traditions and nationalist ideals with western knowledge and best practice is not likely to reach a resolution in the near future. A potential solution to the quality issue and emphasis on rote learning techniques exists if the Thai education system implemented a problem-based learning and teaching methodology at all levels of education. Problem based learning is "collaborative, active, participatory, and hands-on" (Larrier et al, 2016). Problem solving requires an interdisciplinary approach to issues and active learning techniques. Research has found that it increased levels of student involvement and study effort, and students also found it more interesting (Elder, 2015). Given the sociocultural aspects of Thai education, Thai students would benefit greatly from a more interactive and student centered learning environment.

4. The Diploma Disease

During the mid to late 20th century there was rapid growth in Thai higher education and much of this growth was stimulated by the belief that this increase in higher education would translate into a further increase in economic competitiveness, there is however, little evidence for this (Holmes, 2013). Nevertheless job placement became predicated on educational attainment. As the diploma and degree carriers entered the labor market and

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received the best offers, parents and students saw the need to invest in higher education for the specific purpose of job attainment. This quickly created the diploma disease (Dore, 1980). The central premise of Dore's observation was that due to economic modernization, foreign direct investment in manufacturing and the necessity for more skilled labor, there is a corresponding need to educate and develop the skills necessary to meet the demands of the labor market (ie, universities should meet the needs of industry and society). In Thailand, this began in the 1960s (Suebnuorn, 2010). This credentialism as demanded by the labor market translated into greater student numbers in higher education. Therefore, both the need for skilled labor and the need for a university degree to attain professional positions have buttressed Thai higher education for half a century. Yet Thai higher education has failed in its efforts to create and provide skilled labor, critical thinking skills and qualified talent to the workforce both locally and globally. For instance, research by Rangel, Ivanova and Singer (2009) found that employers agreed analytical skills were the most important characteristic in the current job market. Their research described the need for problem solving abilities, foreign language skills and technical abilities as vital to the development of the Thai economy. As employers are now well aware that a diploma does not translate directly to job skills, technical certificates and vocational programs are offering job training and work placement internships which virtually guarantee employment following completion of the program. Most of the international programs in Thailand do not offer these hard skill programs and are then in a position to supply business and social science graduates to an already saturated market.

5. English and Internationalization

As the traditional role of Thai higher education is not to create knowledge but to focus on skill development and knowledge absorption, many bright students and faculty are led abroad. In Altbach (1985), the author gives a detailed description of the push pull factors within the internationalization of higher education. While this was written thirty years ago, the factors involved in choosing to teach or study abroad are still relevant. From the

global perspective, students choose to pursue education from universities abroad for many reasons. For some students this experience allows for the rapid development of a foreign language via cultural immersion. For others it is the chance to broaden their intellectual horizons through studying in programs not offered in their home country or by leaders in the field. Many international students make the decision to study abroad based on political, cultural, or development issues. There are many factors which contribute to student mobility yet it is clear that an increase in the number of incoming students often paying western tuition rates clearly corresponds to an increase in financial consideration (Knight, 2004).

Given the concerns above and the increasing demands placed on faculty to publish coupled by noncompetitive salaries when compared to the international community, many international programs in Thailand will have problems with faculty retention and long term employment. Ideally, the international faculty would stay and teach in Thailand for many years, yet considering the cost of international education, it is no wonder that many of the international faculty with children choose to return to their country of origin where education is often of higher quality and provided at much more affordable rates, if not completely subsidized by the government. Tuition fees international schools in Thailand are usually triple but often five to six times the cost of a Thai language program. This is buttressed by the lack of quality English language education which forces most parents and international faculty to choose between extremely expensive international programs for primary and secondary education in Thailand or returning home with native English speakers to teach their children. Although English is taught at all levels in Thai primary and secondary education, it is not commonly used in day to day life and most students leave secondary school with a limited understanding of grammar and virtually no comprehension of English usage for academic purposes (Agsornjarung, 2003). In the EF English Proficiency Index 2015, Thailand ranked 14th out of 16 Asian nations and 62nd out of 70 in the global rankings (Dumrongkiat, 2016). Given the demonstrably abysmal quality of English in the Kingdom, most

international faculty are left with the rather difficult decision of investing in an international school which may account for half of their annual salary or returning to their homeland. The international faculty is not the only group which is negatively impacted by the lack of quality English language education. Although Phongsuwan (1996) discussed the positive impact on local students who study with native speakers or those who speak English regularly, it would seem that native speakers in Thai international programs act as informal language tutors for the local students and often choose to speak with easier vocabulary so as to be understood within the Thai setting. This results in a reduction of articulation and vocabulary. In conclusion, it is well established that Thai students have an interest in studying English (Grubs, Chaengploy & Worawong, 2008; Rujipornwasin, 2004), yet the results of many years of study have showed little improvement in the Thai education system. This, coupled with affordable English language programs available in other ASEAN nations (Phillippines, Malaysia and Singapore) may be another factor which exerts pressure on international higher education enrollment in Thailand.

6. Culture, Politics and Social Instability

Once considered the rock of South East Asia Thailand has since degenerated in color coded infighting, social instability and military dictatorships. The 2006 coup which removed Thaksin Shinawatra launched a near decade long civil conflict which often made international headlines due to the bloody results. This conflict continues today with a military regime at the head of government. Further bloodshed in the streets of Bangkok could negatively impact student mobility and faculty recruitment. This is coupled with concerns for national security. International terrorism began in Thailand in August 2015 when a bomb exploded in central Bangkok. While litigation continues at the time of this writing, it is fairly clear that the goals of the terrorist involved included inciting fear and destabilizing the tourism sector. Thailand has also been fighting a separatist movement in the south which has intensified in the last twenty years which could further exacerbate national security concerns. If the military

leadership in Thailand fails to stabilize the present domestic conflagration, international education will face further declines in student numbers and international faculty will choose safer locations to continue their careers abroad.

In addition, the fears regarding social instability are further intensified by the policies of the government which have sparked cause for concern among advocates of international education. The military led government requires Thai primary and secondary students to recite the twelve core values daily, stifles freedom of speech, effectively eliminated public debate and has enforced various other initiatives which have led to many academics leaving Thailand for other nations which allow for the expression of these basic human rights. If this process continues Thai higher education may face brain drain concerns which will be compounded by group think and a culture which promotes obedience to authority over critical analysis.

A core concept in Thai higher education is the promotion of Thai values and traditions (ie. Thainess). Yet many of the values which underlie Thainess are not in-line with global citizenship. Applying Hofstede's cultural indicators to Thailand (Hofstede, 2011), one can see Thailand as a culture which respects higher power distance, *greng-jai* (social deference to status), collectivism, femininity and uncertainty avoidance. In such a culture, students and faculty are often discouraged from disagreeing with authority or revealing abuses of power or position. In the limited cases when university staff report cases of corruption and incompetence there are often harsh penalties waiting for these ethical faculty members (Wongsamuth, 2016). If the promotion of Thai culture supersedes the promotion of ethics, problems of transparency and accountability will remain. This issue is further worsened by the potential impact of the ASEAN Economic Community making it easier for student migration and enrollment across ASEAN countries. If Thai lecturers and the students (which make up the vast majority of faculty and student enrollment) are focused on the promotion of Thai culture and behavior as opposed to a regional or global outlook, then

one can expect further challenges within the context of ASEAN educational integration and promotion (Thanosawan & Laws, 2013)

An important cultural issue Thai student's face when selecting and entering international programs is the social advantages which are equally as important as the actual knowledge attained from completing a degree. Social connectivity is seen as the most important variable when choosing a graduate school in Thailand (Phethongkham, 1999). Throughout the process of entering the job market one must use the social connections from family and school to land the interviews and eventually to secure employment. Within this sociocultural milieu a student must analyze the potential connections available within different college programs. However, within this desire to cultivate the right relationships there is a delicate balancing act involving the comprehension and assimilation of international values and the retention of Thainess. One must be careful not to become too international and lose one's sense of Thainess.

7. Conclusion

Thai international higher education is undergoing dramatic changes which will have profound social impacts. The needs of the society, the labor market and the students are not being addressed. Those involved in Thai higher education continue to disagree amongst one another regarding the extent to which Thai universities should become commercialized and engage in market oriented behavior (Rhodes & Slaughter, 2004). The historical ratio of students entering higher education continues to rise while the actual numbers are falling. The skills and attributes attained at many universities in Thailand are not enough to satisfy national needs. Diplomas are distributed in the social sciences and business faculties but the labor market is in desperate need of graduates with sound science, technology, engineering and math backgrounds. Vocational needs continue to rise yet the social stigma of manual labor is enough to motivate those with the financial means to seek white collar degrees thus avoiding the programs Thai society needs most. Technical skills and practical experience are lacking in

most graduates and yet are more important for those seeking employment than ever before. The cost of education continues to rise and English language education is beyond the reach of most Thais even though this is an immensely important skill in the 21st century. Thai society needs these skills to maintain foreign investment and production goals of the relevant industries or face losing this economically important segment to neighboring countries. Lastly, while educational availability has increased and the quantity issue has largely been resolved the quality concerns continue. Universities need to address the imbalance of a lack of critical thinking and global outlooks, the changes in population demographics, students' avoidance of authority or unwillingness to question authority, passivity, obedience, a focus on memorization and other rote learning methods with the needs of the competitive, analytical, multicultural, English speaking global business community of the 21st century. In many ways the past is haunting the future through the impact of Confucian ideology, a long line of military dictatorships and a culture of ascription over merit or ability. The promotion of democratic values, meritocracy and critical engagement in social issues would prove advantageous to Thai higher education and Thai society in the long term, yet these are also the values which those in positions of influence tend to overlook or openly discourage. As a result, higher education programs will continue to produce graduates with a sound background in the social sciences and business yet lacking in the intellectual capability or STEM skills to contribute to the global workforce.

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