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The 'International Student and Staff Experience' in Higher Education: A Multiregional Narrative Enquiry from Thailand

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For

GLOCER, April 2018, University of Nevada.





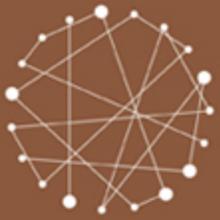
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The 'International Student and Staff Experience' in Higher Education: A Multiregional Narrative Enquiry from Thailand

Overview:

1. 'Internationalisation' in Thai Higher Education (HE)
2. The present study – why do people come? how do they find it?
3. Some findings from international staff and students in different parts of Thailand
4. Interim conclusions and ways forward



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Internationalisation of HE in Thailand

- Thailand has identified HE internationalisation as potentially contributing significantly to economic growth and to its soft power capital - aspirations to become an educational hub in Southeast Asia
- Internationalisation largely defined in terms of **recruitment** of foreign staff and students, despite criticisms of this approach -
 - The Thai government has set targets to recruit 100,000 international students annually – but only currently has 20,000
 - Targets not set for staff numbers – and actual numbers are not known

Nilphan, 2005; Lao, 2015; McDermott, 2013; Schartner & Young, 2016; Sinhaneti, 2011; Young, Handford & Schartner, 2017.



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Defining ‘International’ Students and Staff

For the purposes of this study...

People working as academics, or studying at either undergraduate or postgraduate level, in a Thai Higher Education Institution (HEI) and whose countries of origin is not Thailand and whose primary education was in a country other than Thailand.



Thailand has set targets to recruit **100,000 international students.**

(Sinhaneti, 2011)

South East Asia *Countries*



- ❑ Malaysia had **63,625** international students from 160 nations.
- ❑ Singapore had **52,959** international students from 120 nations.



International Students in Thailand (UIS 2013)

Country of Origin	Number of students in Thai HE
PRC	6,965
Myanmar	1,603
Lao	1,372
Vietnam	1,083
Cambodia	1,018

Very 'localised' recruitment...

- 65% of international students are from these 5 neighbours
- 20% from the rest of Asia
- About 10% from Europe, North America, Australasia
- 5% from South America, Africa.



International *staff* in Thai HEIs?

Little, if any hard information:

- demographic information – a few hundred?
- fields of teaching /research? Mainly in languages/business?
- Hard to categorise - who is 'staff' and who is (short term) 'consultant'... (more on this later)



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Research knowledge-base

- Research investigating the ‘international’ student experience is growing, but remains largely confined to the global west (Young *et al*, 2017).
- For internationally mobile staff there is a much smaller research base, and research into such staff working in Asia is in its infancy (Mason and Rawlins-Sanae, 2014).

This study therefore aimed to provide some important benchmarking data in a hitherto largely under-researched HEI context.



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The present study

- The 'International Student and Staff Experience' in Higher Education: A Multiregional Narrative Enquiry from Thailand. August 2016 – August 2018
- Lead researchers Snodin (Thailand) and Young (UK), jointly funded by Thai and UK Research Councils
- Teams of ECRs based in different regions of Thailand – strong element of mentoring, research capacity building.



The aims of our study

1. To investigate the multiple realities of international staff and students in Thai HE, informed by an empirically-derived model of academic, sociocultural and psychological adaptation and adjustment (Schartner and Young, 2016).
2. To achieve better understandings of the challenges of and potential for increased international recruitment and enhancement of teaching and learning in Thai HE on a regional basis.
3. Use these as the basis for guidance to Thai HEIs on how to improve environments in order to attract and retain greater numbers of 'international' staff and students.



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Research questions

1. What attracts/motivates international students and academics to come to Thailand?
2. What are their perceptions and experiences in Thai universities? What adjustment experiences (academic, sociocultural, and psychological) do staff and students have?
3. How do the different universities across Thailand frame and practise 'internationalisation', and how does this relate to the actual experiences of 'international' staff?

The focus for today is an initial analysis of responses to questions 1 and 2...



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Participants

- 20 'International' students
- 29 'International' staff
- Different regions of the country



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Profile of International Students in the study

- 20 students, snowball sampling
- 14 M, 6 F
- Ages 19 – 54, UG and PG
- 3 based in N, 11 in NE and 6 in/around Bkk
- Wide variety of subjects – mostly business, science, tourism, languages



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Profile of International Staff

- 29 staff
- Equally spread across the three regions (Bkk, N, NE)
- Variety of disciplinary backgrounds – business, economics, English language, other European languages, physics, mathematics – reasonably typical of the areas where international staff work (?).
- Variety of experience levels (2 years – 40 years), nationalities, but mainly north American or European



Method

A two stage enquiry:

1. Individual interviews with staff and students *in situ* – narratives of their experiences – broad themes derived
2. Focus groups of staff and students (separately) in each region further explore these themes in relation to the research questions



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Analysis

1. What attracts/motivates international students and academics to come to Thailand?
2. What are their perceptions and experiences in Thai universities?

A broad, narrative enquiry approach (Trahar, 2011)

- 160, 000 word transcription of individual interviews
- 50,000 word transcription of 5 focus groups
- Thematic content analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) – themes arising:
 - For RQ1 – push/pull motivations
 - For RQ2 - positive and negative perceptions and experiences



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For this presentation...

- Summaries of findings from student focus groups, academic individual narratives, and academic focus group findings
 1. What attracts/motivates international students and academics to come to Thailand?
 2. What are their perceptions and experiences in Thai universities?



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Attractions/motivations for international students

Broadly summarised as:

1. Scholarships/Financial inducement
2. Word-of-mouth referrals
3. Geographical and cultural proximity



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What are students' perceptions and experiences?

Broadly divided into:

- Positives
 - Relationships
 - Support
- Negatives
 - Language barriers
 - Bureaucracy



From staff...

Very similar picture emerging –

Motivations to come to Thailand:

- good employment opportunities, particularly for North Americans, Australasians and Europeans (but some evidence of sexist/racist recruitment practices)
- Better opportunities than in 'home' HE environment for employment, autonomy, participation in research

The experience - For most, more positives than negatives...

- Positives –
 - Good interpersonal relationships, with colleagues and with students, if language barriers can be overcome
 - Strong professional support (for some)
 - Cultural richness of the experience, opportunities for cultural learning, great to work with (mainly) Thai students
- Negatives –
 - Language issues – *but* few learn Thai
 - Institutional and national bureaucracy, uncertainties around their long-term status



(Interim) Conclusions

Many commonalities in motivations (to come) and experiences (once here) among international staff and students in Thailand:

- Push/pull model (Mazzarol, T. and G.N. Souter, 2002) seems highly applicable to both groups
- An existing framework of international *student* adaptation and adjustment (Shartner and Young, 2016) also seems very applicable to the experiences of staff
 - Staff and students are likely to have a positive experience, especially if they display psychological resilience, sociocultural awareness, curiosity and sensitivity, some facility with Thai (or a local, regional variety like Esan).
- Academic adjustment – to local norms, expectations and practices – is the hardest area to adjust to for most ‘internationals’



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Ways forward

- Analysis in its early stages – work with our team (and participants) to further develop understandings of motivations and experiences – localisation, more fine-grained...
- To provide advice and guidance on how a values-based (rather than purely numbers-driven) strategies can help Thai HEIs across the country to be more attractive to staff and students, and to enhance their experience once they are here



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Thank you!

Any questions, comments...

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