

Mobility experiences of international students in Thai higher education

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to achieve a better understanding of the current phenomenon regarding challenges of and potential for increased international recruitment and enhancement of the teaching and learning experience in Thai HE. The focus on what made these people choose Thailand, and their actual perceptions and experiences in Thai universities, are two main foci of this paper.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative approach through narrative interviews was selected as the researchers did not want to constrain this study with preconceived notions that might unduly steer the findings. During the interviews, detailed notes were taken, and the conversations were taped recorded, and then transcribed and analysed. The analytic approach adopted was a thematic analysis. NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd Version 11, 2017) was used to help organise and analyse the data.

Findings – The findings show that availability of scholarships, word-of-mouth referrals, and geographical and cultural proximity to a home country appear to be important pull factors. A series of interviews with international students from many different cultures, from both developed and developing countries, yielded some surprising insights including strong research support in some disciplines and the fact that academic life is personalised in Thai universities.

Research limitations/implications – The findings from this study suggested that engaging returnees as ambassadors, creating links between international student community and home student community before, during and after the education abroad experience could potentially help Thai HE to be more marketable at a global scale. International students have potentials to be future contacts for inducing the flow of international students evident by the social network or word-of-mouth referrals as one of the prominent pull factors.

Practical implications – The findings from this paper provide advice and guidance on how values-based, rather than purely numbers-driven strategies can help Thai HEIs across the country to be more attractive to students and to enhance their experience once they come to study in Thai HEIs.

Originality/value – This study will make an important critique of current theories of academic mobility that primarily focus on developed countries. Current literature in international education favours native English language countries and overlooks experiences of international students in developing countries. This study will contribute to the existing literature which is lacking in reported perceptions and experiences of international students in Asian countries, particularly the new emerging educational hub in Southeast Asia like Thailand. The paper includes experiences of students from developed countries such as Canada, France, Germany, the UK and the USA, filling in the gap in the current literature that dominantly reports experiences of Asian students in the developed English-speaking countries. Additionally, this study also reports the experiences of international students from the countries that are lesser known in the context of international education, including Cambodia, Egypt, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda.

Keywords Internationalization, Thailand, International student, Mobility, Higher education, Pull factor

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Internationalisation is identified as contributing significantly to Thailand's aspiration to become an educational hub in Southeast Asia, and since the 1990s, internationalisation has grown to become an agenda of Thai higher education. Knight (2015) proposed the definition of internationalisation as, "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education". In the Thai context, the decisions with regard to internationalising Thai higher education often involve a small elite of Thai senior higher education leaders using the west as an educational reference point, and reaching out to foreign experts, in particular from the west, for consultation, since Thais perceive internationalisation as a western phenomenon in which a developing country like Thailand merely plays a reactive role. In the past two decades, the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) has sought advice with regard to creating guidelines regarding internationalising Thai higher education from the USA through Fulbright experts, and from Europe through European Union (EU) specialists under collaborative schemes between the Thai-US Educational Foundation and the OHEC, and under Thailand-EU Policy Dialogues Support Facility, respectively. This has contributed to a heightened critique of internationalisation in the literature as a western construct, and implies how Thailand understands internationalisation. Lao (2015) argued that the development of internationalisation in Thailand must be read "[...] in relation to the historical development of the Thai state to favour European and American models" (Lao, 2015, p. 73). The stakeholders at the operational level, including staff and students, were often unaware of their own institution's internationalisation strategy, did not feel they were a part of the plan and did not have a shared commitment. However, the OHEC has recently encouraged Thai universities to create their own definitions and practices of internationalisation that are more responsive to their own local contexts, mission and vision. Although it might take some years for Thai universities to incorporate local values and their visions into their internationalisation plan and practice, these emerging views from higher education communities in other parts of the world such as Thailand, rather than in the west, might contribute to the changing landscape of internationalisation. It will allow it to move away from being a predominantly western phenomenon and a western, neo-colonial concept, to become more of a global phenomenon as proposed by De Wit (2013), a phenomenon that Elspeth Jones and Hans de Wit have referred to as the globalisation of internationalisation (De Wit, 2018).

The OHEC (2018)'s Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy – the key national organisation responsible for promoting the internationalisation of Thai higher education, has defined internationalisation as "[...] the development process through integrated university missions for staff and students at all levels to adapt themselves successfully in the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexities and Ambiguity (VUCA) world and lead their lives meaningfully with cultural grace" (p. 57). This newly coined definition reflects the shift from seeing internationalisation as a goal in itself, to a process that contributes to the quality of education and research for the benefit of staff and students. How internationalisation is defined in the Thai context is apparently comprehensive; however, in reality, one of the common myths on the part of many Thai universities is that their faculties are already internationalised by having international students from a variety of countries (OHEC, 2018). The number of inbound international students is often used to measure the development of internationalisation in Thai higher education, and many universities have been attempting to increase the number of international students (Lao, 2015; Rujiprak, 2016). Mobility is merely one of the six dimensions of internationalisation of higher education that are most widely used (Teichler, 2017), but continues to be a high priority in terms of internationalisation (Knight, 2012). The other dimensions are border-crossing knowledge transfer; international cooperation and communication; international education and

research; international similarity (convergence, globalisation, Europeanisation, etc.); and international reputation. However, mobility is often seen as the “face” of internationalisation, and at times is mistakenly used interchangeably with the term (Knight, 2012, p. 21). A number of universities around the world narrowly interpret internationalisation as the number of international students, and focus their efforts on the recruitment of foreign students as a means of gaining academic reputation and to achieve a higher world ranking. Thailand is no exception. Student mobility is the most common international initiative promoted at the level of the institution in Thailand.

Thailand has set targets to recruit 100,000 international students (Sinhaneti, 2011) but, in reality, the internationalisation of Thai higher education has not yet been marketed on a regional or global scale. In terms of quantity, it has been recorded that the number of international students in Thai universities has gradually increased from 16,000 to 20,000 between 2008 and 2011 (OHEC, 2011), but decreased to around 18,000 in 2013. On the other hand, other countries in the region such as Singapore and Malaysia have increased the number of international students’ two- or three-fold in a decade. In 2014, Singapore welcomed 52,959 international students from 120 countries; Malaysia had 63,625 international students from 160 nations (Do and Pham, 2016), whereas the latest figure with regard to international students that Thailand documented in the year 2016 was collected as long ago as 2013. Malaysia had only around 22,000 international students in 2005 but is becoming an increasingly active player in international education. It has articulated the goal of becoming the world’s sixth-biggest education-exporting country by 2020, with a target of 200,000 international students (Do and Pham, 2016). It is apparent that the global student market is becoming increasingly competitive, and new competitors in the region, including Vietnam, are emerging, and new demand is being created. In order to better respond to market needs and to enable Thailand to achieve the aspiration of becoming the regional education hub, and to gain momentum in the competitive global student market, it is crucial to gain a clear understanding of the factors that induce the inflow of international students to Thailand, and the quality of experience of such students.

This study is also a response to a special report on Thailand’s Higher Education Internationalisation Policy and Strategy funded by the EU in cooperation with OHEC, Thailand. In the report, McDermott (2013) recommended that Thailand establishes a national brand for Thai higher education, with a defined strategy for driving inbound mobility. To date, there have been a limited number of studies that have investigated international students in Thai higher education, especially regarding their actual experiences in Thailand and at Thai universities. If Thailand is seeking to find strategies for driving inbound mobility, how do we know what works for international students and staff, and what does not? There is a need for locally based research that focuses on the lived experiences of international students who have been peripheral and marginalised in developing plans for internationalising Thai higher education. Since they are the direct receivers of the inbound mobility policies and practices, their perceptions and experiences are worthy of investigation.

To our knowledge, there have only been two studies which have reported on the experiences of international students in Thai universities. The first study is an unpublished thesis by Nilphan (2005) in which the experiences of international students in Thailand were not portrayed in a very positive light. The data were drawn from a small sampling of international students enrolling in three international programmes in Thai universities located in Bangkok, whereas another study by Rhein (2018) focused on the adjustment issues of international students from only two specific countries, Japan and Korea. The latter research reports two contradictory experiences of Japanese and Korean students which included excessive undesirable attention from the host community, and difficulty

establishing friendships with the host nationals. This present study expands the topic to include overseas people from various cultures who are studying in many different parts of Thailand in an attempt to redress the gap in the literature.

Last but not least, in an attempt to contribute to the body of knowledge relating to international education, this study will offer an important critique of current theories of academic mobility that primarily focus on developed countries. Research about international student experience has been carried out in a range of countries during the past few decades, presenting varying perspectives on the mobility experience of international students in higher education. Much of such research in the 1990s and early 2000s is characterised by survey-based and large-scaled quantitative approaches (see Bochner *et al.*, 1977; Ho *et al.*, 2004; Merrick, 2004) that contrast with more recent works in the field that have adopted a qualitative or mixed-method approach (see Jackson, 2008; Lee and Rice, 2007; Montgomery, 2010). The current literature with regard to international education favours native English language countries, and overlooks the experiences of international students in developing countries (Ahmad and Buchanan, 2016). This makes sense in that five English-speaking countries, i.e. the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, received nearly 50 per cent of all international students from around the world (Shields, 2013). However, the growth in international student enrolment in non-Anglophone countries, such as China, India and South Korea, has been very high in recent years (30.1, 47.4 and 60.7 per cent, respectively) between 2002 and 2007, far outpacing that of the USA and the UK (0.8 and 9.2 per cent) (Shields and Edwards, 2010). This suggests that the advantages offered by traditionally major destination countries may be weakening, and the research interest in the inbound mobility of international students might need to shift to non-Anglophone countries. This study will contribute to the existing literature which is lacking in the reported perceptions and experiences of international students in Asian countries, particularly the new emerging educational hub in Southeast Asia in countries such as Thailand. The paper includes the experiences of students from developed countries such as Canada, France, Germany, the UK and the USA, filling the gap in the current literature that dominantly reports the experiences of Asian students in developed English-speaking countries. Additionally, this study also reports the experiences of international students from those countries that are lesser known in the context of international education, including Cambodia, Egypt, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa, Sudan and Uganda.

To this end, we have investigated the multiple realities of international students in Thai universities by using an ethnographic approach. These people were from many different cultures and, investigating their experiences could enable us to contribute to the realisation of effective policy and practice for Thailand. The main objective is to achieve a better understanding of the changing phenomenon regarding the challenges of, and potential for, increased international recruitment and for the enhancement of the teaching and learning experience in Thai universities. The stories of international students in this study vary from that of those who are studying in big cities to that of those studying in smaller and more rural provinces across regions in Thailand. The focus on what made these people choose Thailand, and each particular region in the country as their preferred destinations when it came to studying, and their actual perceptions and experiences in Thai universities, are the two main foci of this study.

Inbound mobility in Thai higher education

The statistics and patterns of student mobility, especially inbound mobility, are not well-documented in Thailand. The most up-to-date statistics concerning international students were the data collected in the year 2013 by the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), Ministry of Education. According to this government document, there

were 18,814 international students from 139 countries enrolled in Thai universities in 2013 (OHEC, 2016), of which 68.98 per cent were self-funded, whereas 3,083 and 1,064 students were granted funding by Thai and overseas organisations, respectively. The majority of the international students (62.64 per cent) were studying at the undergraduate level (OHEC, 2016). These figures published by OHEC included 85 non-Thai students with no information about their countries of origin, and another 44 students from various ethnic groups within Thailand. The current study focuses only on international students whose countries of origin can be identified, and we intended to exclude 44 students from ethnic groups of Thailand as they were not considered to be internationally mobile students; rather, they were stateless, born and lived in Thailand, and were not granted a Thai ID card or passport to enable them to travel or study overseas. Therefore, they did not study in Thailand by choice.

Regarding the international students' profile in Thailand, students from China, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia make up the five largest groups of international students as shown in Figure 1. The number of international students classified by the region of origin is shown in Figure 2.

In 2013, the most frequent field of the study of inbound international students in Thailand was Business (about 20.59 per cent), followed by Thai language (about 10.86 per cent), English language (7.47 per cent), Hotel and Tourism (6.24 per cent) and Buddhism (2.47 per cent). Figure 3 shows the data concerning areas of study in the year 2013, in comparison with the years 2005 and 2009. The areas of study popular among international students in Thailand have remained more or less the same in the past 10 years.

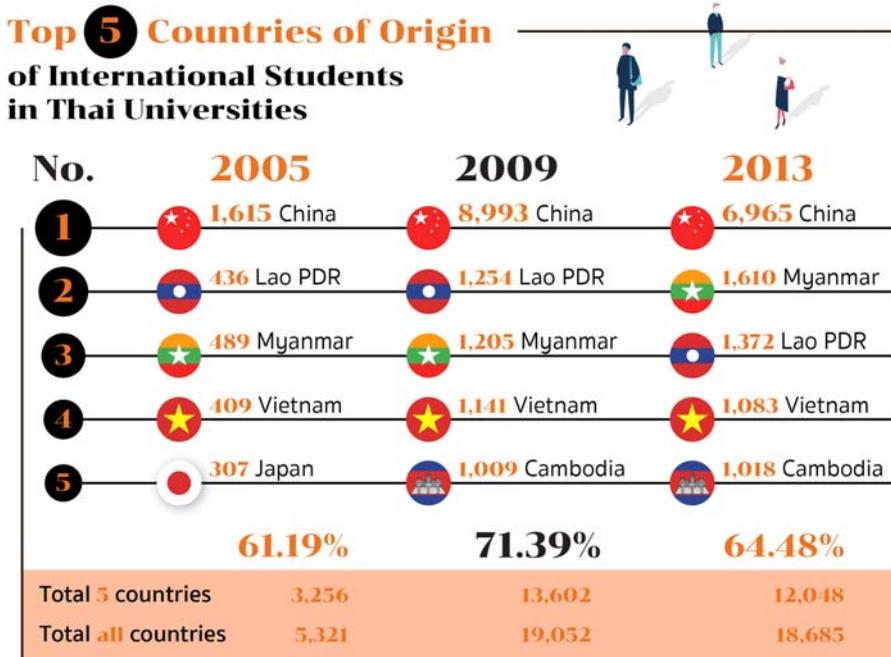


Figure 1. Top five countries of origin of international students in Thai universities in the years 2005, 2009 and 2013

Source: OHEC (2016) and UNESCO (2013)

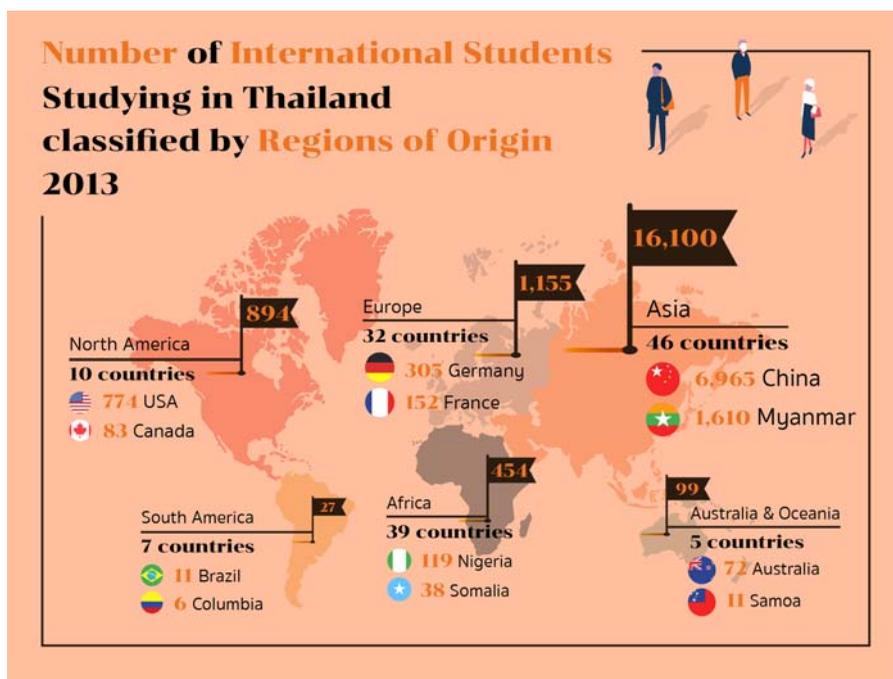


Figure 2.
Number of
international students
studying in Thailand
classified by regions
of origin, 2013

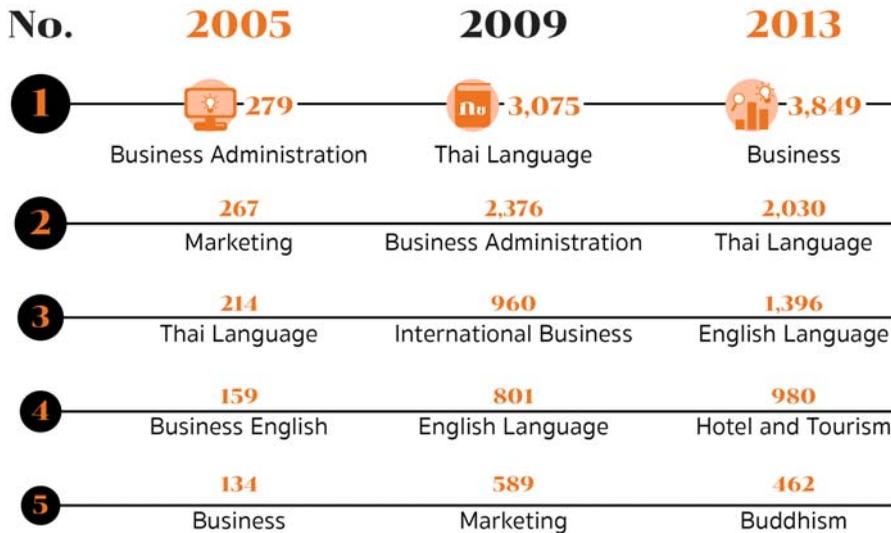
Source: OHEC (2016)

Methodology

The qualitative approach is considered suitable for this study as it allows depth in understanding the lived experiences of international students and challenges Thai higher education is presently facing concerning enhancing the mobility experience of their international students. A qualitative approach involving narrative interviews was selected as the researchers did not want to constrain this study with preconceived notions that might unduly steer the findings. In addition, the narrative interview is eminently suitable for undertaking inquiries with people from many different cultures whose worldviews may differ significantly from those of the researchers (Trahar, 2011). This approach focuses on “[...] the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences, seeking to provide insight into the complexity of human lives” (Trahar, 2014, p. 220). It is located within social constructionist philosophical principles, reflecting a belief in multiple realities and the social construction of those realities. The narrative interview is a form of unstructured, in-depth interview that uses a specific type of everyday communication, namely story-telling and listening to reach this objective (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). The purpose of the interview for this particular project is to let stories be told – the stories of international students who are one of the key players in internationalising Thai higher education but at the same time might have been marginalised or alienated.

The participants were invited to talk about their experience as an international student in Thailand. The interview method is based on the unstructured, open-ended interview format which could be regarded as “open” conversations in which there is no set of pre-determined questions to ask, and the researchers usually have no set agenda. Rather, they listen to whatever the students want to share, as the goal was to obtain the participants’ perspectives without “leading” them (Morse, 2012), entailing an opportunity to “[...] grasp the complexity

Top 5 Fields of Study 
among International Students in Thailand



Source: OHEC (2016) and UNESCO (2013)

Figure 3. Top five fields of study among international students in Thailand in the years 2005, 2009 and 2013

of stories that may not be told otherwise” (Kim, 2016, p. 165). Interview skills, incorporating how attentive, sensitive and responsive the researchers are, would be critical in generating interviewee responses that yielded meaningful data; therefore, prior to data collection, the researchers undertook special training with an expert in the methodology on how to undertake a narrative interview. To ensure consistency between interviews, the researchers followed the steps as shown in Table I.

Phases	Rules
Preparation	Exploring the field
1. Initiation	Formulating exmanent questions Formulating initial topic for narration
2. Main narration	Using visual aids No interruption Only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling
3. Questioning phase	Only “What happened then?” No opinion and attitude questions No arguing on contradictions No-why-questions Exmanent into immanent questions
4. Concluding talk	Stop recording Why-questions allowed Memory protocol immediately after interview

Source: Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000)

Table I. Narrative interview procedures

Purposive and snowball sampling was undertaken, usually with the assistance of local lecturers in different regions in Thailand. The researchers spent an extended amount of time with the research participants as they were living in the research context and working as academics in the same institutions; consequently, they could cross check the data gained from the interview, and could share their own resonances, perceptions and experiences during the narrative interview. However, the participants were not the researchers' students. The researchers/interviewers took notes of events and feelings, and used them to assist in analysing the interview transcripts. Familiarity with the setting ensured that the researchers were more readily accepted than an unknown researcher may have been. The participants consisted of 20 international students from Cambodia, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos PDR, Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa, Sudan, the Philippines, the UK, the USA, Turkey, Uganda and Vietnam. They were enrolled as full-time degree-seeking student in Thai universities across different regions of Thailand. Other additional information concerning the regions where they studied, their gender, age, level and area of study are shown in Figure 4. The pseudonyms were chosen by the interviewees themselves.

The narrative interviews were conducted in person in English for 60–90 min each. Three interviews were conducted in Thai, as the Thai proficiency of the students from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam was near-native, and they felt more comfortable talking about their experiences in Thai rather than in English. During the interviews, detailed notes were taken, and the conversations were tape-recorded. They were then transcribed and analysed. It is important to point out that the researchers did not set out to make comparisons between the experiences of international students who studied different disciplines, or between men and women, or to investigate whether or not there were distinctive differences in experience between those from the west and those from Asia or Africa. The analytic approach adopted

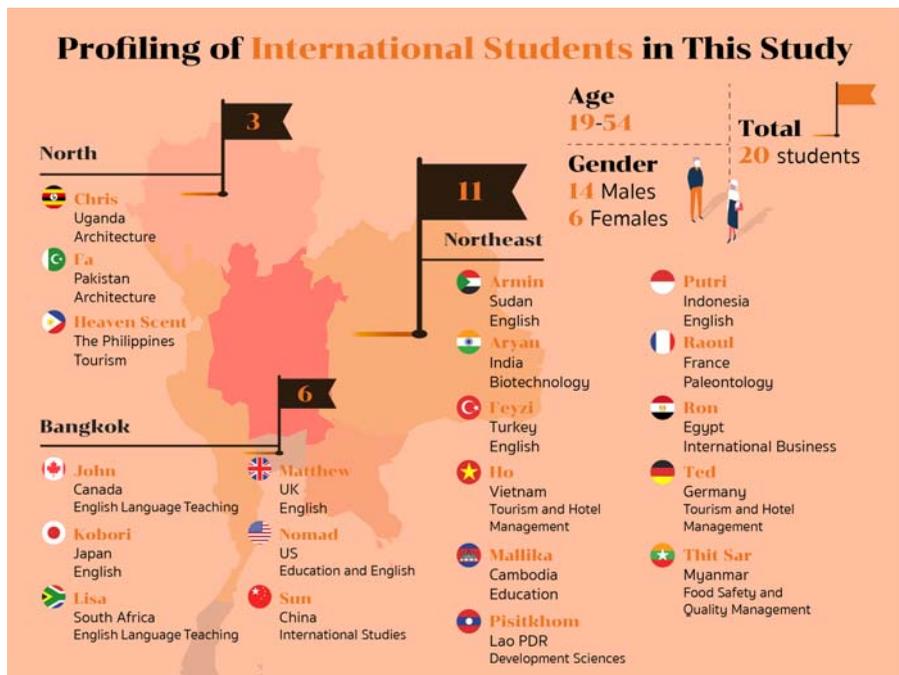


Figure 4.
Profiling of
international students
in this study

was that of thematic analysis (Rapley, 2011). It follows the SRQR standards for reporting qualitative research (O'Brien *et al.*, 2014). The interviewers carried out regular discussion of emerging themes and carried out the coding of data. NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd Version 11, 2017) was used to help organise and analyse the data. Query functions were also used to explore the data.

Findings

What attracts or motivates international students to come to Thailand to study?

Three dominant themes emerged as the pull factors of Thailand and Thai universities, i.e. “scholarship”, “word-of-mouth referrals” and “geographical and cultural proximity”.

Availability of scholarships. The first dominant pull factors emerging from the data was the availability of scholarships. Seven students in the study (from Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Pakistan and the Philippines) chose to study in Thailand for this reason. Some universities in Thailand use this strategy to attract international students, and it was apparent that this strategy worked in terms of attracting more international students to study in such institutions. There were also some other available scholarships, such as scholarships from the students’ home countries, ASEAN Scholarships, the GMS (Greater Mekong Subregion) Scholarship and the HRH Princess Sirindhorn Scholarship; all of these are available for international students to come to study in Thailand, as illustrated in the following stories:

I was going to Italy, but Thailand is also the country which is rich in culture, so like I had two options at that time, Italy and Thailand. Either to choose Italy or Thailand, it was totally up to me. But my parents said [...] they already offered you a scholarship. In Italy, you have an 80% chance to get a full scholarship. They are not quite sure that you’ll be getting a scholarship or not [...] so in that case, I chose Thailand since my parents decided that I’d better choose Thailand. (Fa, Pakistan)

However, the students who were self-funded highlighted the low cost of studying for a degree in Thailand, especially in comparison to their home countries, as seen from the following:

It makes sense economically. I mean I’m sure you’re aware of how much it costs to study here [in Thailand]. Most Americans don’t have degrees actually. Only a very small number of US citizens have higher education degrees because it costs too much. Actually, to tell you the truth, it’s the best investment that I made in my life. It was coming to Thailand and getting an education. It really was. It was not much money, and the benefits that I got out of it just helped me improve my life so much. If I had stayed in the United States, I’d probably still be working in a garage or a body shop, which is not a bad thing, but I’m doing something that I like better. My lifestyle is better. (Nomad, USA)

Finally, unlike most universities in the west, where international students face higher fees when compared to home students, many Thai universities use a flat rate system such that it would cost the same for Thai and for international students:

The fee was for the three years [...] it’s about 30,000 per semester, 35,000. I pay the same fee as the Thai students. I do not pay extra. (Lisa, South Africa)

Regarding the reason why it was inexpensive, Lisa added:

They told us at [the name of the university she was attending] that the Master’s and the Doctorate Programs don’t make money at all. They use the, umm, the others, like all the programs in the undergraduate course to support the program. I think that’s in order to encourage people to go study there, so that’s good.

This accords with some university policies and stories shared by some Thai academics that many universities establish international postgraduate programmes to enhance their academic reputation, with an aim to up their game in terms of international rankings. Income generation was not the main agenda with regard to such a programme of study.

Word-of-mouth referrals or personal social networks in Thailand. The narratives from the international students revealed that word-of-mouth referrals play an important role for them when it comes to deciding to study in Thailand. The majority of the students (14 out of 20 students) in this study had known some individuals in Thailand, some of whom were people from their home countries who gave recommendations and assistance before and when they arrived:

One of my friends was doing a PhD in Thailand as well. When I had a chat with him, he recommended things like coming to Thailand if you want a good university, very friendly atmosphere, and very kind people. I got good impressions about Thailand, and the other reason was like a family reason. They wanted me to be closer, so I am stuck in Asia. That was the main reason why I picked Thailand. (Aryan, India)

Geographical and cultural proximity to home country. The data also reveal that many students choose Thailand as their destination for study because of the location and cultural proximity. This is particularly true of mature students and Asian students, as families play an important role in their decision, as seen in the following narrative:

One of my reasons, yes. Especially, my father [...] he's old and sick now. I want to spend some time with him before it's too late [...] See? In this case, we are not in the west. You don't just fly away when you are 18 and forget about your parents, find a job and [...] We are very close. We don't move out that quickly. Many families don't let their children leave before they get married. (Feyzi, Turkey)

A student from Lao PDR chose to study for a PhD in the Northeast of Thailand in spite of being offered a full scholarship by a university in China. This was because of the linguistic and cultural proximity between the Northeast of Thailand and Laos. Also, he commented that the weather in Thailand and Laos was very similar, unlike China where it would be too cold for him in winter:

I have a family, but I wouldn't be able to go back to them easily when I missed them. [He was thinking about studying in China.] The good thing about studying here [in Thailand] is I know the lecturer, the environment and the educational system as a graduate student. And I wonder if it'd be easier for me, well, it'd be better to study here. But even in Thailand, I did choose where to study. I did this when I studied for my Masters. It is near, not far from my hometown, and it's the Northeastern part, among other factors. If I'd chosen to study in Bangkok, I'd have had to adjust more. But here, when the lecturer teaches, they can speak Lao to me, and when I have a puzzled look on my face, they will lecture in Lao as they'd been to Laos many times. They know some words that Lao people find hard to understand. (Pisitkhom, Lao PDR)

There are other pull factors for studying in Thailand as is apparent in the stories of other international students. For example, there are more opportunities for using English than in their home countries:

I spent six years in the U.S., learning and working. I experienced 9/11. I was still operating in the U. S. economic conditions, and the change in immigration policies became stricter for foreigners, so I made up my mind to go back to Japan. I was not satisfied because I wanted to make use of my English skill. But English language skill is not required in Japan at all. That was one of the reasons I came to Thailand [...] Japanese people never speak English. Regarding their English speaking ability, I think Thai people have a higher performance than Japanese people do. Actually, I'm satisfied with it. Also, considering that English is not a native Thai language, Thai people speak English very well. (Kobori, Japan)

We don't speak English. We just speak Arabic. And the government nowadays around 25 years. Before that in my country, people could speak English. But now they just focus on the Arabic language. It's difficult for me if I learn English in my country. They don't speak English. (Armin, Sudan)

The Vietnamese student in this study also emphasised that he had not only learned how to speak Thai after studying in Thailand for a year, but his English had significantly improved through his study in an international programme, and through socializing with other international friends on campus. On a daily basis, he used English to communicate with his flatmate from Egypt although both of them were learning Thai and could talk to each other in Thai.

What are their perceptions and experiences in Thai universities?

There are two positive themes, i.e. “relationships” and “research support”, and two negative themes, i.e. “language barrier” and “bureaucracy” emerging from the data.

Relationships. It seemed that professional life in Thailand has been personalised, if not informalised, and it was perceived in a positive light, as in the case of the Egyptian student in this study who had a prior experience of a more hierarchical and formal relationship between teachers and students in Egypt:

In Egypt, when people come to the class, I think there is not like a good relationship between them and the teacher. They are just a doctor, so they just teach, and they just take the homework, and that's it. Then they go to the exam. But I think that's because of a lot of students [...] But here it is like we can go and talk to teachers about anything we want, and we can have a relationship with teachers. It's a really good relationship. We can invite teachers to go out. It's fine here. But I think in Egypt, this doesn't happen. (Ron, Egypt)

This accords with the story shared by an Indian student:

When I compare education in Thailand with India, I think it's more relaxed here. There seems to be a very friendly relationship between the staff and students. (Aryan, India)

There was also evidence of integration between international students and home students, and in some cases with locals, such as the following story, despite cultural differences:

I've made a lot of friends. I have a few friends here, but a lot of Thai people know me. In some parts, they call me or message me “Hey! Can you help me with English sentences?” “Why not? No problem. I can do it for you. That's fine.” Mostly Thai people that I have seen are friendly. And in this area, mostly in Isaan [in the northeast of Thailand], they always work in their houses, have lunch together. (Ted, Germany)

Actually I see Thai people are more helpful. When I need help, they get help easily. If they are busy, they can't help me. But normally I get help from my friends. (Armin, Sudan)

The personalised relationship also included some extra efforts that a Thai lecturer made, especially to accommodate international students. This was not recognised by the university, or there was no matrix in any quality assurance to acknowledge this personalised relationship that enhanced both the teaching and learning. However, it was well appreciated by the international student, as is apparent in the following narrative:

Chris: there was a time I studied some course units because I wanted to do some design. I'm allowed to pick some courses. I picked some undergraduate courses for the Bachelor degree. It's supposed to be taught in Thai, but I picked it, and the lecturer designed it for me in English.

Interviewer: They read the texts in English, or just the materials prepared especially for you in English?

Chris: No, it wasn't just prepared for me, but only for me. I think he designed it from the Thai version, translated and edited it, just for me, so I was sitting in the same classroom with the Thai students. It's a Thai programme, remember? (Chris, Uganda)

Research support. Unlike the popular belief in Thailand that research support is one of the weaknesses of Thai universities, some international students in the study highlighted the

research support they received from the university, for example, research facilities, international research networks and funding to go overseas for training or conferences:

The fact is that in my two years I was able to go on three study trips overseas. I just went on one, but we went to Hong Kong. We were connected with Hong Kong University there, connected with universities in England and America [...] that we have with [...] one of the writers whom I was actually researching for my paper. And within those four days, we went to see all four universities. It was subsidized. So we pay 10,000, and the university pays 10,000 or something, so we didn't have to pay a lot. So, 10,000 for about I think five days, and that includes the flights and the hotels, and yeah, that was pretty good, including everything, so the university pays some. (Lisa, South Africa)

The lab I am doing is biotechnology, so the obvious thing about having some good facilities is like labs. When I came here as a researcher, I got really good equipment in my lab, and even lab assistants. They were really kind and willing to give you any sort of help. When you needed help or anything to do with your labs, they were really willing to do that for you. I was impressed with it. (Aryan, India)

Language barrier. Some universities in Thailand are presenting themselves as “international”, but their English language policies do not necessarily reflect this, as seen through the eyes of some international students:

I have been here for four years. I didn't see any of the registration pages online that worked. There is an English version which is broken mostly, and where you can't register because nothing works. (Raoul, France)

Some international programmes recruit Thai students who cannot understand English, and the lecturers sometimes had to lecture in Thai which was perceived negatively by the international students:

Sometimes, some teachers teach in Thai, so they don't teach everything in English. And there is one thing I don't like about it is that in International Business in [the name of the university he was attending] compared to other universities, they accept students who cannot speak English. And I always talk to my friend like why you guys don't try to practice English. (Ron, Egypt)

Bureaucracy. Thai higher education has an aspiration to become “international”. However, its bureaucratic and administrative system does not necessarily reflect this, even as international bodies grow within the country, as seen through the eyes of some international students:

It was [...] It's like something from a hundred years ago. I've never seen anything quite like it. The first thing [...] okay [...] you need what's called a Certificate of Equivalence to enter the university, which shows you finished high school to Mathayom 6, right? Same as Thai, right? Shows that your exams are the same as Thai. This is where the problem starts because number 1, [at] the office where you have to go to get your certificate, they don't speak English [...] or any other language, only Thai. I don't know why, because Thai people don't need the certificate, so why don't they put an English speaker there? Okay, first problem. The second problem is they don't recognize any education system except the Thai one. They understand America because it's the same as Thai. So, here you have a GPA. You have a transcript for high school, right? In Europe, we don't. There's no GPA, no transcript, no exams. You start at 12. There is an exam when you're 16, and that's it. Finished. Your Ministry of Education doesn't understand that, and they constantly ask “Where's the transcript?”, “Where's the GPA?”. And they send letters to the school in England and ask for these, which they don't provide. The schools [...] in England, the schools, don't keep exam records because the exams are not organised by the school. They are organised by the government. (Matt, UK)

One of the negative things I found was when I first came to this particular university, it seemed to be very unorganized, extremely unorganized. I don't wanna go into details about how unorganized it was, but the administration was very chaotic at times. I just felt kind of lost, and then the leadership changed and university things started to improve. It got much better but overall I think the learning experience was very good. The administrative side was bad in many cases. (Nomad, USA)

These lived experiences of international students in Thailand accord with what Lao (2015) described in terms of the internationalisation of Thai higher education. That is, there is a paradox between the overt embracement of modernity and the persistent rhetoric of traditionalism, as a challenge for the development of Thai HE. Thai policymakers might be enthusiastic about the process of internationalisation, but they continue to preach the importance of Thai cultural values and system, and “selective” borrowing from the west as a part of the larger policy agenda (Lao, 2015).

Discussion

A number of points from the above analysis bear further discussion in relation to the relevant literature. First, “relationship” is one of the dominant themes in the experiences reported by the international students in this study. This is in contrast to similar research conducted by Nilphan (2005) and Rhein (2018). The international students in their studies reported isolation and lack of integration with local people, especially with Thai classmates, leading to failure to integrate international and intercultural dimensions into their learning process and into their experience. Where these international students were studying in Thailand might account for the different experiences. The research contexts in both Nilphan’s and Rhein’s studies were in big cities where people were busy leading their own lives, and appeared to be relatively indifferent towards one another, whereas the strong relationships with Thai people reported in this study largely occurred outside the capital city. In provincial universities, in the northeast of Thailand in particular, a strong relationship between international students and Thai people, both students and staff, was formed. In addition, some international students could form a friendship with local people beyond the gates of the university, learning local dialects and cultures, and found the experience both pleasant and supportive in terms of their studies and their lives in Thailand. In addition, language barriers appear to be a major factor that influences the perception of relationships on the part of international students. The findings from this study support the notion presented by Merrick (2004) and Montgomery (2010) that students who had greater competence in terms of the host country’s language were better integrated and more satisfied with their time at university.

Second, some of the pull factors of Thai higher education are reflected through the stories shared by the international students in this study. These are in line with the push-pull factors presented in Mazzarol and Souter’s (2002) study whose research findings are drawn from studies undertaken in Australia, China, India, Indonesia and Taiwan. The factors that this study has in common with their study include geographical proximity, courses not available at home, family and friends’ recommendations or word-of-mouth referrals, and cost issues. However, the reputation of the university which is one of the common pull factors of HE institutions around the world presented in Mazzarol and Souter’s (2002) study did not appear in the current study as a dominant pull factor with regard to Thai universities. This leads to the implication of the study that the main issue for Thai universities to consider is to create a reputation for quality education services. While “playing the world ranking game” might be the Thai HE’s long-term goal, the reported experiences in this study such as strong research support and Thai universities’ links or alliances with other international institutions might be a valuable resource for Thai universities to begin with in an attempt to promote Thai HE. Also, the pastoral relationship between lecturers and students in Thailand, both on and off campus and after graduation, which was favourably viewed by the international students in this study, could serve as a unique experience that Thai HE could offer international students. In other parts of the world, including in countries in Asia such as China, international students often report inadequate student–faculty interaction (Wen *et al.*, 2018). Such information could be used to attract potential international students, and should be easily accessible online in English for

potential international students. At the time of writing this paper, the Thai state does not provide such online resources as does other successful education exporters such as the USA and Australia. The former provides resources via <https://educationusa.state.gov> which is described as “[...] the network to promote US higher education to students around the world by offering accurate, comprehensive, and current information about opportunities to study at accredited postsecondary institutions in the United States”. The latter provides resources for its potential international students via <https://internationaleducation.gov.au>. In Thailand, there are two privately owned, independent and non-profit websites – www.studyinthailand.org and www.academicmigrationtothailand.co. The latter provides some resources showing the experiences of international students in Thailand, whereas the former has the following statement as the objective of the website: “[...] to introduce you to international accredited university degree programs at English-speaking universities and colleges in Thailand, and to all aspects of academic and student life”. However, there is so far no endeavour to provide current information about international student experiences and opportunities to study in a Thai university via online resources at the national level. To achieve the Thai state’s aspiration to be an educational hub in the region, it takes, as Knight (2011) claimed, more than a large number of international students, or a science and technology park, but involves a national-level effort to build a critical mass of local and foreign actors in relation to income generation, soft power, modernisation of its domestic tertiary education sector, economic competitiveness, the need for a trained workforce, and a desire to develop knowledge and a service-based economy.

In addition, to strengthen the existing pull factors, Thai universities should engage returnees as ambassadors, creating links between the international student community and the home student community before, during and after the educational experience in Thailand, since they have the potential to be future contacts for inducing the flow of international students, as evident by the social network or word-of-mouth referrals being one of the prominent pull factors. In relation to cost issues, many universities in Thailand are aware of the role of scholarships as another important pull factor when it comes to attracting international students to study in their institutions as seen in the information regarding financial support for international students in their prospectuses, websites or via social media. However, some universities have underestimated the significance of such information, and lose out in attracting more international students.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that this paper might provide qualitative in-depth stories of international students, but it has limitations, including a relatively small sample of international students, the majority of whom are studying in Thai public universities. Future research would benefit from a wider sampling, including those enrolling in private universities. It would also be useful to add longitudinal elements in terms of retrospective reports of international students who have already left Thailand. Some elements to consider in future studies might relate to how Thai universities could optimise the benefits that home students receive from the presence of these international students regarding enhancing linguistic and intercultural competence and increasing their global perspectives.

Conclusion

Thailand is reputed to be one of the top destinations for tourism, but not yet as a popular destination for study. A lack of access to higher education in some countries in Southeast Asia currently benefits Thailand, as this has been a key driver for much of the present international flow that has taken place in the last decade. However, this might not last for long, and if the Thai state has an agenda to increasing the quantity and the quality of inbound mobility, there is a need to establish a national brand for Thai higher education as suggested by McDermott (2013). So far, the internationalisation endeavours on the part of Thai HE institutions are highly fragmented from one university to another without formal,

integrated, systematic and structured influence on the part of the Thai Government (McBride, 2012). The findings suggest that the Thai state, together with the universities, needs to undertake a proper analysis and develop an understanding of what needs to be done regarding English language policies and practices and administration, in order to bring them into line with the international status they claim. This is because the weakness in this area is indeed harming the effort to implement the quality international mobility experience. It is also important for the Thai Government and for universities to develop strategies to create a conducive learning environment for both home and international students in order to achieve the Thai state's aspiration of becoming a regional higher education hub, and to capture a greater international student market. The findings from this paper provide advice and guidance on how values-based, rather than the current purely numbers-driven strategies which set the target of recruiting 100,000 international students, can help Thai HEIs across the country to be more attractive to students and to enhance their experience once they come to study in Thai HEIs. Given the growing competition for international students within Southeast Asia, it has become increasingly imperative for Thai universities to have a full understanding of the factors that influence student selection and the decision to study in Thailand and hence enhance Thailand's visibility as a higher education destination throughout the world, especially for neighbouring Asian countries.

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