

A first Look at international Students' Experiences in Thai Higher Education

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Abstract

Almost nothing is known about the main protagonists of international Thai higher education – the students. Major findings in this paper are related to two rarely discussed dimension of international: The program office and administration, and, in a single response, student uniforms. International students are critical about the academic quality of their programs, but a majority of 90 percent of the respondents declared the decision to study in Thailand a good one. Not that positive is the feedback when asked whether they would further their studies in Thailand. While Thai and foreign students get along well outside the classroom, group and team work cause problems. That points to a weakness on the lecturer side. Lecturers in multi-cultural international programs need specific techniques to foster integration and exchange between different nationalities and cultures, therefore specific training for lecturers is suggested. The selected responses in this paper provide ample opportunities for further research, aiming to improve international higher education in Thailand.

Introduction

More is known about Thai students studying abroad (Pimpa, 2003, 2005) than about students in international programs in Thailand, in particular about foreign students. Due to inconclusive and contradictory numbers published by the Thai Ministry of Education (OHEC, 2015a, 2015b, 2016, 2017; Werner, 2017b), we do not know how many foreign students study in Thailand, where they are from, how much money they spend in the country, why they chose Thailand over other options in their decision-making process, what experiences they made at their universities, how many exchange students come here and what they will say after returning home about their experiences, nor do we know how many Thai students opt to study in an international program, and what are their criteria to choose on over the others. Actually, we know hardly anything that could help Thai universities to better their target group marketing in order to attract foreign students in times when enrolment is shrinking and will continue to decrease further (OECD/UNESCO, 2016; "Thailand Economic Monitor - June 2016: Aging Society and Economy," 2016).

The selected responses are a vast source of insight for those who know Thai international programs, but also show many aspects that are transferable to any other international higher education environment.

Foreign students are especially critical when discussing the academic quality of the programs they study, but at the same time, they prefer 'good teachers' over formally highly qualified lecturers with low-level teaching skills, at least on undergraduate level where most respondents draw upon. While in Thailand

currently strong focus is laid on formal qualifications of university lecturers, responses clearly show that students are not much interested in whether one has a PhD or not – they want to have inspiring lecturers, or what they call ‘good teachers’.

Responses show a strong interest among foreign students to learn speaking Thai language, but apparently there is no support from international programs beyond the curricular courses. There could be done more by the universities.

Along with the principles of ethical research, neither the individual respondents nor the university they are talking about are identified, in order to keep respondents safe from any potential repercussions. This research aims to identify opportunities for improvement, rather than for blaming any party involved.

Research Methodology and Background

This survey is part of the research project on Experiences from international Thai Higher Education, as outlined in the research proposal (Werner, 2017b).

The online survey, a straw poll to identify indicators for future research on international higher education in Thailand, opened on 15 April 2017 and ended on 30 May 2015. Using Google Docs (Werner, 2017a), the survey was published on the author’s Facebook page¹ and on the Facebook page ‘Study in Thailand – The Guide’², which is an outreach of the Website <https://studyinthailand.org>.³

The survey aimed to get a first overview of what international students in Thailand say, and to test questions for usability in a later research project applying the qualitative research methodology of narrative interviewing (Jovchelovith & Bauer, 2000; Werner, 2017b). In this methodology that needs motivating question causing a narrative by the respondent, questions that can be simply answered in two or three words are not helpful (Kvembekk & Frimannsson, 2013).

The survey offered four different sets of questions, one each for international students, foreign resident lecturers, visiting foreign lecturers, and Thai lecturers in international programs at Thai higher education institutions. This paper discusses the responses to some of the questions to international students.

The term ‘international student’ is not clearly defined as being a foreign student in Thailand. Thai students studying in such a program often consider themselves to be an international student, much in line with their development towards becoming global citizens (Thanosawan & Laws, 2013).

An ‘international program’ at Thai higher education institutions is commonly understood as being conducted in English, as opposed to national programs conducted in Thai language (Rhein, 2016b).

Respondents

73 valid student responses are available for analysis (n=73). The respondents represent 26 different nationalities, with two of them indicating double citizenship: Austria, Cameroon, Canada, Denmark,

¹ The page is available at <https://www.facebook.com/uli.werner/>

² The page is available at <https://www.facebook.com/Study.in.Thailand/>

³ [Studyinthailand.org](https://studyinthailand.org) is run by the author since April 2008. It is the only comprehensive source for students interested in studying in an international program at Thai higher education institutions. According to Google Analytics, 1.228.521 unique users visited the site until present day (1 Dec 2017). 50.11 percent (n=830.587) of these users were located in Thailand.

Egypt, France, Germany, India, Iran, Ireland, Japan, Mauritius, Mexico, Myanmar, Namibia, The Netherlands, Nigeria, Oman, Philippines, Slovenia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, United Kingdom, and United States.

69 respondents study for a degree, and four respondents are exchange students, three German students for one semester, and one student from Austria for two semesters.

The 73 respondents represent experiences from 11 different universities. One respondent indicated 'some Rajabhat international college' without elaborating further. The other universities are Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Assumption University, Bangkok University, Mahidol University, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Ramkhamhaeng University, Siam University, Stamford International University, University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, and Webster University Thailand.

Q: How do you remember your first days at your new university?

The first days at a new university are always challenging for students. The more important is that the university has processes in place to accommodate new students and give them the feeling of being welcome to the program and the institution.

That does not always seem to work well. Some Thai students express their confusion politely and seem to seek responsibility in themselves.

Degree students from Thailand answer:

It was beyond my expectations pretty much everything regarding to my previous university which are Thai style.

Disoriented. Tough, but impressive in terms of level of knowledge (it was Prof. [...] introduction to language class).

First day at university was fun and a little bit difficult because it's different from high school, I've met different people from many places and it's excited for me.

Quite awkward, because all come from different high school and society with different personality and attitudes.

I was a bit lost. I don't really know who I was from the start, but I tried to be nice and participate in activities arranged by the upper class so I could made more friends and get to know more people.

I just get lost everywhere, keep asking the way to my classroom. Also, the great thing is that I remembered that some professors like to mention about choosing what you really want to study and talking about the purpose of being here, that what you gonna do after graduating. I feel inspired from this.

Felt a bit conscious of my age, but everyone was very welcoming. I was determined to get a good grade in the first class and read the book way more than was eventually needed.

In Thai culture, it is uncommon to express direct criticism (Komin, 1990). While the comments of Thai students express a level of uncertainty that might be expected as normal in such a situation, the picture changes when coming to the comments of foreign students:

Horrible Kindergarten (Austria)

Chaotic as Thailand is apt to be. But OK otherwise. (Canada)

Exciting due to the new environment & people, but also confusing due to bad administration. (Germany)

It was disorganized (Iran)

The first day was like chaos. (Japan)

It was good at first but I don't even see foreign students in my class (oh well, one Indian guy!) (Mexico)

A bit stressful when I applied, because there wasn't any steps to follow, everything was like wild wild west. I was surprised that nobody noticed me about when first course starts. I was waiting for a mail or email but didn't received anything, so I went back to University and they've told me that course is finished already. But later when other classes started it was pretty much the same as in my country. (Slovenia)

Terrible Organization (Switzerland)

The very first course was run by the previous director of [...]. He raced through a book on biology, spending very little time on anything and gave everyone an A. To be honest, I thought it was a little bit of a micky mouse course. (United Kingdom)

I remember it with total shock, dismay, and confusion. (United States)

Confusing! No orientation, no explanations...nothing (United States)

I remember it being very chaotic with the lack of direction or guidance from any facility or staff and a lack of English usage by non-native speakers complicated the issues. (United States)

Foreign students make positive statements, however, when focusing on other aspects beyond administration and bureaucracy:

Exciting, didn't know what to expect but it was all a pleasant and International experience which I was looking for. (Austria)

A very friendly atmosphere, a lot of new faces, people of different ages, diverse backgrounds. I also remember being a kind of "curiosity" for my fellow Thai students. (France)

Good memories, nice bunch of students from different nationalities, great atmosphere. (France)

Meeting a lot of new friends. Wondering about the food and that everyone eats all day long (Germany)

First day, first class with a German lecturer. The class and the university were above my expectations. (Mauritius)

My first day of university convinced me that I made the right choice to study here. I have always imagined the lecturers and students to be distant. Actually, all are very friendly. (Myanmar)

My first day was quite nice, I made a few new friends from different countries. (Namibia)

I was excited. It was the beginning of a new life for me, in many ways, and a springboard for further study. It was great to be back in the classroom as a student. (United Kingdom)

Very nervous and not at all confident that I would be able to achieve anything, (It has been a long long time since I studied!), and I wondered how the students would react to an aging Westerner in their class! I shouldn't have worried as there were some students even older than me and the Thais, of course, were wonderfully helpful and friendly. (United Kingdom)

Q: You study in an international program. How international is your program (e.g., fellow students, lecturers, contents, teaching materials, administration/office)?

As there are international programs with over 50 percent foreign students attending (“About IIS - Student Numbers 2016,” n.d.), and other programs with almost no foreign students, answers were expected to be mixed. However, the answers express higher levels of appreciation in programs with many foreign students, while also showing the vast continuum of dimensions of *international*. One respondent also addresses the practice to put students from different years of study into the same class, which appears to be a frequent cost-cutting means at Thai universities, but also affects the quality of education. Another one addresses the different teaching styles of Thai and western lecturers, which in turn affect the development of the students.

[One international program] OK, [another international program] Thai. (Austria)

They should keep more international lectures. They have more experience. (Cameroon)

At [one public university, undergraduate]: a very wide array of students from all over the world, different level of motivations and rather relaxed atmosphere. A considerable proportion of the students not really motivated. The same observation could be made about lecturers, some were very involved in the courses and had a clear goal while others had questionable work ethics.

At [another public university, graduate], small classes, motivated students. Few international students. Demanding professors with international backgrounds. Very much oriented towards academic research although we had the intervention of a few industry professionals from time to time. A program that was developing an international connection very quickly and effectively. (France)

85% of the students are foreigners, 90% of the lecturers are foreigners, the content is based on the country level the material too. (France)

Students were very Thai, teachers were very "farang". (France)

Maybe 5% Thai students, everything else is foreign. (Germany)

The students are from all over the world... Mostly Thais, Cambodians, Chinese followed by Africans (Nigerians mostly) and Germans. Others are from Middle Eastern countries and Europe. 90% of my teachers are foreigners which I really like. They have a lot of experience (stalked their FB and LinkedIn). The teaching material sucks sometimes. Old, outdated, too bulky (as we have to use only some chapters in them). Our Lecturers provide us better course materials and references to learn. Took time to get used to the staff but we got really close to them. They are very friendly and responsive. But there's always that 1 person that treats you like crap (no names mentioned). (Mauritius)

It's not international at all. 98% of student are Thai. They used the book for grade 3-5 to teach us. also in my university some of teacher suggested us to use Wikipedia to write essay or presentation. It happened today and I swear I never do that because while I study at [another international program in Thailand] all the lecturer taught me to do the right things. Not to be a copy cats so yeah so Thai. (Mexico)

I heard from my Burmese friends who study in other universities in Thailand that in their universities, some lecturers are Thai and they frequently teach in Thai. I am so glad it doesn't happen to [my international program]. I am in my fourth year now. So far, I have only been taught by three Thai professors who NEVER speak Thai during the lectures. I could say it is a true international program because both lecturers and students come from so many parts of the world. I get to learn so many cultures and also share my country's cultures to other friends too. Regarding the contents, overall, it is fairly international. Professors not only teach the curriculum, but also share their life experiences (Sometimes, it is a concern. Some professors talk too much about themselves and about their life that the class hours are wasted). Another problem with the contents is that professors often teaches the same content over and over. A lot of the professors start teaching from the basic of Journalism (the first writings on the wall, the first printing machine, etc.) which is enough to go over in the first one or two classes. The reason this problem occurs is because students are always a mix (first year to final year) in every class. If a class has only a certain year student (say, final year students), then the teacher can focus on more advanced curriculum rather than talking about Gutenberg. [...] (Myanmar)

I select my lecturers to be exclusively international since the Thai way of teaching doesn't really bring me anything. There are quite a few foreigners in my classes but the majority is still Thai and they tend to group together, a few very nice exceptions there. The teaching material is international and many lecturers add more material by themselves. (The Netherlands)

Students are from everywhere, variety of foreign lecturers and also Thai lecturers, teaching material is pretty basic, administration is not very international, staff can't speak proper English, but it is getting better. (Slovenia)

The quality of the courses delivered is questionable. In my experience, the first half of my degree was of an acceptable level, the second half was not - the quality of lecturers and course material was not consistent.

The lecturers and students were from a varied international background, but mainly western. Levels of organization, administration, materials were not up to standard. (United Kingdom)

Wearing a student uniform or not is mentioned as a dimension of *international* by one student:

For the administration, I appreciate that they don't require us to wear student uniforms. However, the thing about prohibiting the sandals, shorts and so on makes it less international. A true international program should allow students to wear what they want, because the most important thing is about studying, not about the looks. (Myanmar)

Q: How do you think about foreign (or Thai) students in your courses? Do they help you learn and develop better?

Responses highlight a problem that may stem from the focus on rote learning in the Thai education system, as opposed to the education to critical and independent thinking in the West, and other cultural differences (Rhein, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). This problem could be addressed in some lecturer training on how to teach in an international program at Thai higher education institutions focusing on techniques to integrate different cultures within the classroom:

The foreign students did as foreign students do, we worked together and helped each other. Very few of the Thai students were capable of doing this and were seen as a burden to groups although some were able to follow the foreign lead and be productive within the group. (Canada)

Thai students have always been very helpful outside of class but hardly participated during courses/discussions/exercises etc... Most international students were very keen to discuss and share their experiences both in and out of class. (France)

Absolutely not. [The Thai students] are mostly those who need help. Their level at English is generally not sufficient for a university requirement. (France)

Many Thai students were helpful in some ways to better adapt myself, got directly integrated into a group, never was alone for Lunch. (France)

Thai students in the undergraduate program were often shy, not motivated and not critical, but in between were brilliant exceptions. The other nationalities taught me how to behave in an international environment. In the Master Program was the motivation of the Thai students in general high. But there were also interviews before students got accepted and most students came from rather prestigious Thai universities. (Germany)

As I said, we were a lot of German students in my courses, so it happened that I didn't really get in touch with the Thai students. Which was also my own fault, they seemed to be very nice. (Germany)

90% of the Thais don't really help us [academically], many foreigners are here just to get a pass mark to get their degree and visa approved. I am aiming for a 3.5+ GPA and it was really hard to find the smart ones. But in the end, we've been stuck together for 2 years. An Oman guy with 3 girls from China, Taiwan and Thailand + me. (Mauritius)

[...] One problem with students is that they like to stick to their own group, Germans, Filipinos, Thais, Chinese, etc. You need some courage to get into their group and talk to them. However, if you are good at breaking ice, almost every group is welcome that you come over to them and make friends with them. I take this as an advantage to develop the skill of making friends. Another problem is that it is sometimes difficult to communicate with some Thai students due to

the poor English language skills. And I find it harder to make friends with Thais than to make friends with other Asian or Western friends. (Myanmar)

Most Thai students have a different attitude towards education in general, they hardly question anything and I believe this has led to a lack of critical thinking in most of them, they hardly challenge me to learn anything but international students ask more questions which opens up opportunities to learn new things, instead of simply absorbing information. (Namibia)

[...] The Thai mostly group together, speak Thai and their English is mostly very poor. This makes communication scarce but a foreigner can take the initiative and break the ice. In my experience, the foreigners who speak Thai have better relations with the Thai students. The foreigners help me develop regarding studies, the Thai help me develop with their language and culture. But it is all up to the individual student. (The Netherlands)

I believe that because all of us are from different backgrounds, learning from each other is inevitable.... if you learn to listen. Seeing things from different perspectives is helpful in developing and learning. (Thailand)

Meeting and studying/working with people from different cultures is always enriching. Saying that, I generally preferred not to work with (most of) the Thai students on my course in group presentation or written projects. Any international student who is genuinely interested, engaged, and involved in any course of study would add positively to an international classroom. (United Kingdom)

Thai students need help with many international business and language concepts. Assisting and teaching them helps me to develop my own knowledge. This is a win-win situation. (United Kingdom)

[...] I believe most of the Thai students are forced by their parents to attend classes and they really have little interest in taking advantage of the opportunity. However, some students see the opportunity for what it is and leverage it to their advantage. I believe every student and lecturer contributes to the education received, but again it depends on how receptive the student is to learning and developing. (United States)

Other responses show problems in group and team work situations that easily could be resolved if the lecturer is aware of them. The lecturer then can assign individual parts within group or team work that, however, need to be individually evaluated. Some responses give reason to think about that:

Thais tend to freeload. Overall, the multicultural experience vastly improves learning. (Germany)

Very few did, the rest just cheated and copied off of me, groups were horrible as they never did the work and even copy pasted straight from the internet. (United States)

It varied a lot. As a foreign native speaker of English, one has an advantage. At times I felt that both foreign and Thai students were very parasitic, in other words they used students who were good students who studied hard and worked hard. Other students were very helpful and contributed equally. (United States)

Foreign comments often criticize that Thais stick together, and so do some Thai comments on foreign students. Here again, training for lecturers in international programs might well offer techniques and solutions:

Not really often. They most often as a group. (Thailand)

Foreigner students and Thai students are separated into 2 groups so we seldom experience in co-operate together. (Thailand)

Actually, if I ask them and they understand what they learn they will help and teach me about what they know and what they learn. (Thailand)

Q: How do you think about your lecturers? Do they support you and make courses interesting?

Lecturers are important people from a student perspective, as they either foster deep understanding or just do their job. The following respondents express their critical views, but they do not separate between foreign resident lecturers on the one hand side, and foreign visiting lecturers coming for a semester or just one month to teach their subjects, on the other. Here, further research is needed, and student evaluation of courses is suggested to be taken very seriously. That way, bad lecturers – how formally qualified in academic terms they ever might be – can be removed.

Lecturers have been helpful for the most part, spending considerable time after class to answer any questions. Occasionally we had lecturers that did not have appropriate background/experience to teach at university level. (France)

[Undergraduate at one public university]: Most lectures were nice and helpful and tried to make the courses interesting, but most of them designed the courses in a way that suites the lowest skill level on the courses, therefore the courses were in general not demanding enough and sometimes boring. [Graduate at another public university]: in general, more challenging and strong focus on group activities and student interaction. It was fortunately not only lecturing and reading [PowerPoint] Slides. Exams were also mostly challenging, but the grading wasn't always transparent and seemed to generous sometimes. (Germany)

Most do... The classes are very interactive with a lot of assignments, self-learning, debates. But again, there's also this one lecturer sometimes that just gets paid to teach and doesn't care. We have a review and feedback to give on them. So, we're good if they don't come back to teach to us again. (Mauritius)

Not at all. They copy the slide from the internet only one of them are good and some information is incorrect so when I disagree he says "it's ok if you disagree but you need to remember things that I teach because it will be in your exam." (Mexico)

Most of them are motivated and have many stories from personal experiences. Some of them also talk with you about contemporary issues.

A few have been rather disappointing. Those ones were always lecturers who came for a semester. It felt as if they had other things on their mind and the course was not the main reason they came to Bangkok. But still they did their job. [...] (The Netherlands)

I was not impressed of the level. Seems some of the "easy" subjects are given to professors how given up or lack pedagogical knowledge. The Thai professor i had in Thai language was not be credible as a teacher. I had two guest professors that told me personally that they had to "dumb" down the lectures, curriculum and tests to accommodate the school and students compared to in their own universities. (Sweden)

Most of the lecturers here are highly supportive. Meaning that they want their students to ask them anything that could help the students to study better. Professors here are also love to share their experiences while teaching and I feel that this really helps make the course becomes more interesting and more fun. (Thailand)

Some are still very enthusiastic and hopeful and really care about you learning as a student. Others were more just like, "Oh this is not on the exam, you don't need to know it." I believe quite a couple of the lecturers started out hopeful with the students--trying new things like flip classroom (which did not work out because most students did not do assigned readings), but many may have given up on the majority.... until they find the few who really care. [...] (Thailand)

I would say that I genuinely learned from, and was inspired by around 5 of the professors who taught in my BA program [...]. The remainder were either average, or below average (disinterested and uncommitted). I felt that they didn't put as much effort into delivering quality courses at [this international program] as they may do in their local universities - it seemed they were either enjoying the holiday, or lacked respect for a Thai university program. (United Kingdom)

[...] There is a very small handful of lectures that actually taught anything. All of the others are taking advantage of a paid trip to Thailand or an opportunity for a work permit if they live in Thailand. (United States)

Another response related to the current focus on formal qualifications by Thai quality assurance bodies. A formally qualified lecturer is not necessarily a good lecturer, as this student points out:

As I said above, there were some who I felt were very unqualified to teach. Maybe they had PhDs, they did not know how to develop inspiring lessons. Others were very good and indeed inspired me to engage in the courses and do research. (United States)

Q: How do you think about your internal program's office and administration?

Another dimension of international is the program office or administration. Choudaha concludes that "institutions must innovate not only to grow international student enrolment but also balance it with corresponding support services that advance student success including expectations of career and employability outcomes" (Choudaha, 2017). The administrative office of an international program is obviously such a supporting service, or at least is supposed to be (Werner, 2017b).

Office and administration appear to be so important to participants of international higher education in Thailand that they included remarks on them in answers to previous questions. Here are some extracted responses on that topic:

Program is very international (fellow students, lecture, prof., teaching materials), however admin/office does not meet international standard.

Students are from everywhere, variety of foreign lecturers and also Thai lecturers, teaching material is pretty basic, administration is not very international, staff can't speak proper English, but it is getting better. (Slovenia)

All is international except the office it's Thai and not really good. (Oman)

Yes, an international program. The students were great. Several instructors were quite bad, some should not have been teaching (anyone), but the several good ones made up the bad ones. The administration staff and leadership was borderline disastrous [...] (United States)

The program office or administration is a major figurehead of an international program. It is the major point of contact for a student in terms of questions, permissions (visa etc.), and problems. One response directly related to that figurehead role:

[...] It was absolutely the worse experience from the semester was meeting the administration at [...]. I would even go so far as saying the immigration office in Bangkok is better and I hate that place with all my heart. They couldn't talk or understand English. They didn't do their assignments, like providing the correct documents for the student visa. They were also late to provide the documents which had consequences for me. I had to leave the country and go back to renew my tourist visa. They always came with excuses or blamed someone else when it came to problems or questions. [When proctoring examinations,] they let the Thai students cheat on exams because they either didn't want to tell them off or they didn't have the guts to do it. (Sweden)

The following responses reply to the question heading this chapter, varying in the level of politeness of expression, but quite clear overall. Obviously, lack of communication and mutual understanding leads to lack of transparency, thus causing distrust. One respondent even believes that there is corruption going on with regards to grades and examinations. Others clearly exhibit different levels of adjustment to a given system of bureaucracy, either by doing the 'smiling way', or just bringing in their Thai wife when particular problems occur.

The worst. (Austria)

They are trying to improve the management every year. (Cameroon)

Well to be quite honest most of the office staff were no more than window dressing (look busy do nothing) with the exception of 1 or 2 individuals who got things done. [...] (Canada)

It was a disaster when we started but it did get better or did we just get used to it? (Denmark)

It was difficult, especially due to the language and cultural differences, Thais usually take their time to deliver info about courses or don't understand why some official papers are urgently needed because of strict immigration laws. (France)

*They are very helpful (only when you kiss their a[**].) (Mexico)*

The staff is all Thai and they tend to have good relations with the Thai students in the program. The foreigners usually have difficulties communicating with them unless they speak some Thai, but even then. [...] Especially when it comes to visa-stuff and study planning it is absolutely necessary to do thorough research because the office will not provide you with all the necessary information. This is really the biggest flaw in this study. It would perhaps help to hire some foreigners, especially old-students, to help with in the office. One point I have to make is that I have a strong feeling that there is some corruption going on regarding grades and examinations. (The Netherlands)

Incompetent. Slow. Unwelcoming at times. Unsystematic. Generally, things get done but there's a lot of room for improvement such as a basic system in enrollment and information relay. (Philippines)

Still lacking international, professional standards. This may currently be acceptable in Thailand but even so the efficiency is lacking. The individuals are not very informed. The staffs should be more empowered to make decisions, access information, and improve their own organization. (Thailand)

Too Thai... too much 'kreng jai' culture. There's a sense of abuse of power sometimes. I sense something of the sort while working in one of the admin offices. (Thailand)

A bit of a joke, still stuck in the stone age. (United Kingdom)

I am aware that the office is maybe not the most efficient place and that things do go wrong sometimes, but I think this is a symptom of Thailand in general and not a reflection on the abilities of the staff. I have found that if one is polite and smiles a lot, you can usually get what you want eventually. They have a difficult job to do with all the different nationalities and cultures they have to deal with and I know it can't be easy for them. I have avoided any problems by bringing my Thai wife with me whenever anything complicated needs to be done. (She is a professor at university too, so she understands the system well). I have lived in Thailand for a long time so I understand the Thai way of doing things. Also, I have listened well to my professor so I know to just 'shut up and smile.' (United Kingdom)

Q: How seriously do you try to learn speaking Thai language?

Few foreign students took learning Thai seriously. That may not come as a surprise for non-native speakers of English focusing themselves on studying in an international program, thus struggling enough with improving their English skills to a sufficient level. Some, however, mastered getting to a conversation level in Thai language. Over all responses, there appears to be a strong interest in learning Thai, but international programs do not usually provide support in language learning beyond the syllabus. Still, some comments reflect on the attempts to learn Thai:

Not very much for my first two year then a little more and ended speaking the language well enough to hold a long conversation on somewhat complex topics. (France)

I try to pick up vocab and understand the grammar but it is hard work especially with the 5 different tones, so it takes time, 'sabai sabai' as they say. (France)

Not really trying, English is covering most parts. (Germany)

I've been to a language school for over 2 years. I can read and write. But I still consider myself low intermediate. Depending on the situation I get rather good along. (Germany)

During my study in Germany I have finished a Course in the Thai language for three years. (Germany)

I tried very hard to read and write. Speaking is easier but I try to just remembering it all when I use after somehow it feels to be used to it to recognize how this will be pronounce or how to write it and to know the meaning. (Germany)

Took me one and a half year. I can speak, read, write and understand Thai. A must-do if you want to survive here, same goes for anyone who wants to stay in any foreign country. (Mauritius)

I learnt Thai to the extent that I could read and could communicate in daily conversations. (Myanmar)

I bought the best book and took private classes from foreign student who spoke fluent Thai I tried to learn from Thai tutor, but it was hopeless. I learnt the alphabet to be able to read and write. The conversation went ok, but it was difficult to communicate with the Thai students. (Sweden)

I try very hard to speak and listen to Thai language as I believe that if one lives in a foreign country one should try to speak at least a little of the language. I also feel that, especially in Thailand, it can earn you some respect and cause people to be more helpful towards you. I have attempted the writing of Thai, and at one point I did know the entire alphabet, but sadly I never practised and now I have forgotten most of it. (United Kingdom)

Quite seriously, I learned some basics before coming and I'm currently enrolled in a language course which I take quite seriously. I hope to read and write the language one day but only after achieving reaching and advanced level proficiency in speaking and listening. (United States)

I wanted to learn Thai before coming here, but time is always the great equalizer. That being said, I still try to learn Thai as I see it as an opportunity to become more familiar with the ideology of Thai culture. (United States)

Q: How do you see your decision to study in Thailand today when you look back?

Responses to the previous questions often expressed relatively harsh criticism towards elements and structures of Thai international higher education programs. The more surprising it comes that the overall mood on the initial decision to study in Thailand is overwhelmingly positive.

Out of all responses to this question (n=50), only 5 students expressed that they are not sure whether their decision to study in a Thai international program was a good one for them. Here an example:

Retrospectively, I believe I made a very quick decision without having defined a long term goal. But at the time, I had no clear idea of what I wanted to do. Perhaps I should have taken more time to find the right motivation/program. (France)

I have my regrets at times. I'm mostly concerned on how competitive my image would be on the pedestal of corporate standards. (Philippines)

Not a single respondent indicated frankly that her/his decision to study in Thailand was a mistake.

In contrary, an overwhelming 90 percent of the students (n=45) expressed that it was good decision and they would do it again. Here are some example statements:

I did not have a choice but it was one of the best things i have ever done. (Denmark)

Best choice of my life because that's where I met my wife. (France)

One of my best decisions ever. (Germany)

It was a risky decision in terms of accepting, but in the end worth it. The five years were great and back home I landed a job at a well-recognized consulting company, therefore I had no disadvantage from this choice. (Germany)

I have only 2 words for that: "NO REGRETS". I didn't waste my time and my money moving to Bangkok. (Mauritius)

It was a right decision I made to study in Thailand. It is still better than studying in my own country. (Myanmar)

Studying in Thailand has open me upon to many opportunities and experiences I could probably have never had access to in my home country or anywhere else so If I had to do it all over again, I would. (Namibia)

It ticked the boxes for me. It was affordable and practical, so I'll forever be grateful for the springboard it provided me. However, I'll always have a nagging feeling that the quality wasn't there consistently. (United Kingdom)

It was a great experience and it started me on a path which led me to my second year in a doctoral program in the U.S. (United States)

Honesty, with all the negative things that I have said above, I still feel that my education was the best investment I ever made and I learned very much from the experience. (United States)

Q: Would you study your next degree level in Thailand too? If yes, at the same university?

While the responses to the previous questions were overwhelmingly positive and students considered their decision to study for (usually a Bachelor) degree in Thailand, answers look quite different when it comes to the question whether they would study their next degree in Thailand as well. Over time, students certainly get more mature, learn about shifting demands in labor markets as part of their studies, and get more focused on what they want to reach in life. Therefore, the critical answers to the next degree are not considered contradictory to their overall good first experience in Thailand. They just take a different perspective – no wonder, since what they could learn about living in a foreign culture, they learned already.

Here are some critical responses:

No, I consider a PhD from a Thailand as not valuable and also feel that academic writing in Thailand is very bad, because it isn't practiced enough (no bachelor thesis, etc.). I refused a PhD scholarship opportunity. (Germany, studied Bachelor and Master in Thailand)

I will not study my Master Degree in Thailand. I prefer studying in a Western country, so that I can immerse in a completely different culture. (Myanmar)

Depends on my professional situation; from an academic point of view rather not. (Switzerland/United States)

I studied at an American university (masters) which offers classes at an international school in Bangkok. I'm fairly certain I would not study at a Thai university again. (United Kingdom)

I already did exactly this, but I have no intention of doing a PhD right now. (United Kingdom)

I already have. I earned an MA in Communication from the same university, [...]. This was a much better experience than the BA degree. (United States)

Yes, I will continue my education in Thailand, but definitely not at the same university. (United States)

Q: Is there anything else you would like to say?

Most responses to this final question show the openness of respondents towards the topic, and the interest of some in further research being done with the aim to improve international programs at Thai higher education institutions. In other words, most respondents seem to be quite happy that finally somebody asked them for their experiences. Others suggest further improvements in areas that were not discussed in the survey questions. Here are some examples:

Hopefully this project is successful in what it is trying to accomplish. (Canada)

I am glad my studying is over but as I said before, the best thing i have ever done. (Denmark)

My studies in Thailand were a great way to learn languages and how do solve problems on my own, meet new people etc... However, the programs lacked of a connection to the industry through partnerships or any kind of mandatory internships which I think could add great value. (France)

I think I talked a lot already. Just wanted to thank my German lecturer for his advice when i started my first course almost 3 years ago. (Mauritius)

I hope all things which I wrote to this form can make people open their eyes cause I'm sure if foreign students want to study in Thailand they must have to do a research before they apply. Otherwise study in international program in Thailand may waste your money and waste your time. (Mexico)

Overall, I am very happy studying in Thailand. The only thing I have some issues with is the attitude of Thai people over the foreigners. And according to my other foreign friends, I am not

the only one having this issue. However, from the studying point of view, I have never regretted choosing [...] University. (Myanmar)

Thank you for creating this survey, I hope my answer will help you and hope that the international universities in Thailand will one day be at the same standard as the universities in the Western or European countries. (Thailand)

Over all it was a great experience but a lot of stress. They need to kick out students that cheat, it degrades the reputation of the country, school and the value of the degree. (United States)

It has been a great time in Bangkok. Will never forget this! (Germany, exchange student)

I love Thailand and I consider it as my second home after my semester abroad. (Germany, exchange student)

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