

# Experiences from international Thai Higher Education

Research Proposal

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## 1. Abstract

Enrollment in Thai higher education is dramatically shrinking and will shrink even further in the years to come, while Thailand faces a big wave of online degree programs offered by prestigious foreign universities. Within Thailand, only enrolment in international programs is likely to grow sharply, driven by Thai students who seek the skills required by the shifting demand of employers. Thai students are expected to enroll more often in programs that are able to attract foreign students. Not much is known about foreign students in international Thai higher education. This knowledge gap prevents Thai higher education institutions from effectively attracting foreign students, who are also an important economic factor for the Kingdom of Thailand. This research project aims to fill that urgent knowledge gap through the methodology of narrative interviewing, and to identify indicators for future research through simple online surveys among students in Thailand, especially those in international programs at Thai higher education institutions.

## 2. Introduction

How many foreign students study in international programs at Thai higher education institutions? Since student numbers published by the Royal Thai Ministry of Education proof contradictory and inconclusive, we actually don't know. Why did foreign students choose to study in Thailand over all the other options they had? We don't know. How much does an average foreign student contribute by spending on education, accommodation and living to the Thai economy, and which nationalities spend the least and which the most? We don't know. How many exchange students come, experience, and then spread their experiences in the form of credible peer information back home? We don't know. And what will they say? We don't know. How many lecturers in international programs are non-native speakers of Thai, thus being expected to stick to teaching all content in English? We don't know. How many foreign lecturers come (regularly or not) to teach at Thai universities in an international program to increase students' global perspective in their field? We don't know. And finally, how many Thai students opt to study in an international program in their home country? We don't know either.

It seems we don't know much about foreign students and lecturers as the main protagonists in international Thai higher education, nor about the motivation and choice-factors of Thai students enrolled in international programs, although about 50 international programs conducted in English compete for students in Thailand with sometimes exorbitant, but always higher tuition fees than taken for education conducted in Thai.

This knowledge gap prevents international higher education institutions from reacting to shifts on the demand side, thus leaving them alone when it comes to attract more students in international programs to compensate for the radical decline in student numbers in traditional university programs conducted in Thai.

There is a demand for foreign students, be it for their tuition fees or even to increase the quality of education and the language proficiency of Thai students. The most-chosen program of studies in this field is business administration, which includes courses in marketing. In marketing, however, the golden rule of thumb is 'know your customer'. That is what this research project aims to provide.

There is also a demand for international programs from Thai students. Some expect the enrolment in international programs to increase sharply in the next couple of years as students react to the changing demand of skills by employers (Mala, 2016). It can be expected that skills-seeking Thai students will preferably enroll in programs that are able to attract a sufficient percentage of foreign students.

This research project will collect in-depth information about the experiences of foreign participants in international programs at Thai higher education institutions by interviewing them one by one, and to find answers to the open questions above, in separate tracks asking students, resident foreign lecturers, and foreign visiting scholars.

The insights gained will be utilized in the form of recommendations to Thai higher education institutions how to attract more foreign students to Thailand, which is of high importance in these times of dramatically shrinking application numbers, resulting from low birth rates and increasing competition from foreign universities and online degree programs.

### 3. Background and Supporting Literature

Since education is a special good, even a satisfied customer of education will not become a regular customer. Those becoming a customer do not really know what they buy. Education is a good one buys because one does not know the contents of that education. If the content would be known already, it would not make any sense to spend time and money on it. The more important is trust in students' decision-making processes when choosing a program/university combination. Family, peers, even recruitment agencies influence students' choice. The strongest influencer, however, is word of mouth, such as feedback by alumni or exchange students.

Another trust-building element is student exchange, i.e. one home institution shows trust by outsourcing parts of its education and sends its students for a semester to a Thai institution. Not only that nobody knows how many foreign students study at Thai universities, there is also no indicator how many exchange students visit Thai higher education institutions every year. Both data are critical, however, to increase the attractiveness of studying in Thailand.

Incoming foreign students, be it as degree or exchange students, are of value for any hosting economy. They spend on their education, accommodation, and on living costs.

The insights derived from the proposed research are relevant on both institutional and policy level. On institutional level, they will help international program administrators and lecturers to better understand their customers, thus being better able to target the specific international segments, and to

get satisfied customers who trigger word-of-mouth advertising, which is the most powerful marketing tool of all.

On policy level, an increased understanding of foreign participants in international Thai higher education will help institutions to target and customize their internationalization efforts, and point relevant agencies to areas where further research is needed, and may be funded.

### 3.1. Foreign students in international programs in Thailand

Little research was published about the target group of international programs at Thai universities, the students. Still today, there is more research available about Thai students studying abroad. Pimpa examined the influence of family on the students' choices of international education abroad (Pimpa, 2005), as well as the influences by peers and recruitment agencies on their choices (Pimpa, 2003). Rujiprak examined the influence of social support and self-efficacy on cultural adjustment and psychological outcomes of foreign students in Thailand (Rujiprak, 2016), however without mentioning the home countries of the respondents.

When it comes to university choice, where do foreign students go – do they follow the choices of Thai students? Thailand has 166 post-secondary institutions plus two autonomous Buddhist universities, and it has 69 private institutions. Public higher education institutions are the preferred place to study for Thai students, chosen by around 80 percent of them. Only about 20 percent study a private higher education institutions (Schwab, 2017, p.19).

International students bring an important aspect of diversity to the classroom and the university campus, giving Thai students access to global perspectives without leaving Thailand (Schwab, 2017a).

Easy to observe is in such classroom is that studying with foreign students improves English language proficiency for Thai students enormously. If one's parents cannot afford to pay the often-exorbitant fees for international schools in Thailand, there is little opportunity to develop everyday language proficiency at Thai schools or universities – except, when the students meet a couple of foreign, non-Thai speaking fellows every day in the classroom. Native and other foreign speakers of English often choose to use a simplified vocabulary to be understood in the Thai university context, but even if that results in a reduction of articulation and vocabulary in the initial stage (Rhein, 2017), it leads to fluency in speaking and the necessary self-confidence to build up on that – and that is much more than conventional degree programs taught in Thai or Thai schools have to offer.

Financial considerations are another important aspect of foreign students coming to Thailand. They pay tuition fees, accommodation, and all necessary costs of living in Thailand. Thus, they are an important economic factor. Thailand is working on the internationalization of its higher education system since 1990. Lavankura analyses the motivational factors as drivers of this process, as they may differ from country to country. At the institutional level, universities' needs to generate fee income is identified as one of the major drivers (Lavankura, 2013).

Growth in the higher education sector does not automatically lead to long-term economic growth of a country. Holmes analyzed fifty years of higher education expansion in the United Kingdom and concluded, such an assumption might better be called a belief (Holmes, 2013) – but growth in incoming students (i.e., degree and exchange students) can help to grow the economy. Their investment in

education, accommodation and everyday life can be seen as a form of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (Engwall, 2016, p. 227).

When it comes to students' choice where and what to study, trust and attractivity play a major role besides what family and peers say (Pimpa, 2003, 2005). Education is not a yoghurt, as Engwall correctly describes:

*“The whole idea of education is that the student is going to learn something unknown. If the contents were known, it would be a waste of time to take the education in question. This, in turn, also implies that a student will not pursue a particular education more than once. Thus, in contrast to a cereal, a toothpaste, a car, etc, repeat consumption does not come into question even if the student liked the education very much.”* (Engwall, 2016, p. 222-223)

Engwall also mentions the evaluation problem. Whether an education was good is usually hard to proof for a student since the real judgement comes from the labor market, what may need many years. Engwall also points out that student perception of their own program of studies changes over time; the most interesting courses may lose in importance, while others turn out to be very valuable. In addition, Engwall mentions the difficulty to receive trustworthy judgements from alumni. Most alumni will hesitate to give negative information about an international program since that only would negatively affect the status of their own degree (Engwall, 2016, p. 223).

This has implications to international higher education marketing. It makes understand the customer all the more important. Yet, there is almost no research supporting in that, as this chapter has shown.

### 3.2. How many foreign students study in Thailand?

The number of international (foreign) students in Thailand as published by the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC), Royal Thai Ministry of Education, are as follows:

*Table 1 Number of international students*

Year	Total	Male	Female	Source
2008	16.361	8.685	7.676	(OHEC, 2015a)
2009	19.052	9.985	9.067	(OHEC, 2015a)
2010	20.155	9.964	10.191	(OHEC, 2015a)
2011	20.309	10.921	9.388	(OHEC, 2015a)
2012	16.999	8.383	8.616	(OHEC, 2015a; OHEC, 2015b)
Not indicated	18.814	Not published	Not published	(OHEC, 2016)
Not indicated	16.910	Not published	Not published	(OHEC, 2017)

These numbers published by the Office of the Higher Education Commission, Ministry of Education, are inconclusive and questionable. OHEC (2015a), for example, states that the second most studied programs by foreign students in Thailand is Thai language (OHEC, 2015a, p. 13). Apparently, the numbers of foreign students in Thailand were derived from the Immigration Police's statistics on

educational visas issued, which include educational visas 'Non-Immigrant Type ED'<sup>1</sup> for students at Thai language schools.

This may also explain another contradiction in this publication. OHEC (2015b, p. vii) states in its introduction the 20,309 students for 2011, but the next following detailed list of public and private higher education institutions in the same publication only shows 11,509 foreign students studying at all institutions together (OHEC, 2015b, p. 1-310). The latter number might be more realistic, therefore.

Even worse is the OHEC report on 2014, which forgets to mention Thailand's largest University, Ramkhamhaeng University, with its about 900 foreign students<sup>2</sup> ("About IIS - Student Numbers 2016," n.d.), nor does it mention Thailand's second-largest private university, Assumption University, and other universities well known for their international programs<sup>3</sup> (OHEC, 2015). In conclusion, we do not know how many foreign students actually study in an international program in Thailand.

In its introductory section, the Study in Thailand 2013 report says:

*"The top five institutions housing the highest number of foreign students were Assumption University (4,179 students), Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (1,276 students), Mahidol University (1,233 students), Ramkhamhaeng University (1,004 students) and Dhurakij Pundit University (598 students)."* (OHEC, 2015, p. vii)

In the same report, the subsequent pages list detailed information on each public and private higher education institution that offers one or more international programs. There, the numbers of foreign students attending each university is published as follows: Assumption University (2,844 students, p. 191), Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (80 students, p. 87), Mahidol University (804 students, p. 98), Ramkhamhaeng University (946 students, p. 139) and Dhurakij Pundit University (60 students, p. 206).

Notably, the Study in Thailand 2014 report by OHEC does not mention any student numbers in its introductory section (OHEC, 2015). OHEC's 2016 publication Thai Higher Education – Facts & Figures reports 18,814 foreign students (OHEC, 2016), and OHEC's Thai Higher Education at a Glance 2017 reports 16,910 foreign students (OHEC, 2017), both not providing any details where these numbers come from. Whether this reduction in student numbers is a reaction to the 2014 military coup in Thailand, to changes in visa regulations, to a fall in visitor numbers from China, or has other reasons remains open to speculation.

What has some credibility, however, is that OHEC names in the same report six public and two private universities that offer international programs but report that no foreign students are attending their

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<sup>1</sup> The Royal Thai Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia, for example states on its Website: "Non-Immigrant Visa Type "ED" may be granted to applicants who wish to pursue their full-time education, internship or any other educational programme in Thailand. The visa is valid for 90 days from the date of issue. Visa holders may contact the Immigration Bureau of Thailand, after entering Thailand, for the extension of stay and re-entry permit." Source: <http://www.thaiembassy.org/jakarta/en/services/64472-Non-immigrant-visa-ED.html>. Date accessed: 2017-11-18

<sup>2</sup> The author of this paper teaches there in the international program since 2002.

<sup>3</sup> These other universities include, but are not limited to, Dusit Thani College, Payap University, Rangsit University, Shinawatra University, Siam University, Stamford International University, and Webster University Thailand.

programs (OHEC, 2015).<sup>4</sup> This may support complaints about the almost total lack of quality of some international programs in Thailand (“Thai academics decry graduates’ weak degrees, poor English,” 2005).

Every report on international higher education in Thailand and on international student mobility related to Thailand relies on the student numbers published by the Office of the Higher Education Commission, Ministry of Education (OECD/UNESCO, 2016; Schwab, 2017a; Sinlarat, 2013; “Thailand Economic Monitor - June 2016: Aging Society and Economy,” 2016, “World Bank Education Statistics - Country at a Glance - Thailand,” n.d.), and so does any researcher. The dubiousness of the numbers published by OHEC allow for the conclusion that nobody really knows how many foreign students study at Thai universities. Thus, foreign students are not recognized in Thailand as an important economic factor yet. They do not only increase fee income for universities, they also pay for accommodation and life.

### 3.3. What is international Education?

In his UNESCO ‘Answers – What is international Education?’, De Morentin De Goñi writes:

*This process tends to promote harmony amongst individual and collective values, amongst basic needs and long-term interests, by giving citizens the capacity to make choices with knowledge of the cause and with appreciation of autonomy, solidarity, equality and liberty.*

*This open attitude is based on the acquisition of knowledge; in the free circulation and dissemination of ideas and truthful information; in the promotion of experimental and innovative activities; and in perfecting principles of the intellect, morals, and international citizenship. (De Morentin De Goñi, 2004, p. 96-97)*

In Thailand, the terms ‘international education’ and ‘international student’ are used differently, as opposed to targeting international citizenship development.

This is confirmed by Thanosawan and Laws, who examined how a large state-funded, research university in Bangkok and its affiliated international college interpret and implement global citizenship education in their programs (Thanosawan & Laws, 2013). They report a Thai university administrator stating:

*“This administrator inferred that nationalism equates to patriotism, Thai values and culture. Therefore, it is important that the concept of Thai nationalism be maintained. According to this point of view, students need to be good citizens of Thailand before they become global citizens.” (Thanosawan & Laws, 2013, p. 297).*

The university and its affiliated international college adopted different approaches to integrate global citizenship in their teachings, and thus teach it differently to Thai and international (foreign and Thai) students. While the university demands its students to become good Thai citizens first as a precondition to become international citizens, while the college target the development of globally competent graduates (Thanosawan & Laws, 2013, p. 298). We can assume that not every Thai university grants its international programs so much independence. This assumption is supported by a yet unpublished 2017

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<sup>4</sup> These are public universities like Dhonburi Rajabhat University, Phranakhon Rajabhat University, Rajamangala University of Technology Rattanakosin, Srinakharinwirot University, Suan Dusit University, and Sukhothai Thammarat Open University, and private universities like Mahanakorn University of Technology and Vongchavalitkul University.

online survey by the author on experiences of international students in Thailand, in which several foreign students harshly criticize the behavior of administrators, i.e. expecting students to believe everything and to act obediently.

Looking at Thai universities from a postcolonial perspective, Zane Ma Rhea tries showing a way to combine local wisdom theory with global citizenship (Ma Rhea, 2017). She concludes:

*“The Panjaawitee [sic!] Wisdom Method, a pedagogical approach to enabling the causes and conditions for wisdom to arise, seeks to open up a pathway for students to cultivate their potential for wisdom through higher learning by using the wisdom pot as its metaphor. The approach is not culture specific but does enable students to learn about, and learn to respect, their own cultural and religious traditions while at the same time supporting them to become skilled and knowledgeable about their responsibilities as adults in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. At university level, students commonly start this journey with some fear and trepidation but by the end, most have found that they have developed both personally and professionally. It is apparent in marking their final assignments that many have undergone a profound and paradigmatic shift in their understanding of themselves and their place in the world, and have learned to look for balance in their way of thinking about complex issues, drawing on their emergent skills and knowledge, balancing analytical, ethical and metaphysical ways of thinking.”* (Ma Rhea, 2017, p. 224)

Similarly, in Thai common understanding, an international student is not necessarily a foreign student. Many students studying in an international program at a Thai university consider themselves international students, as an unpublished online survey by the author in 2017 has shown. This is the more often, when students study in a really international environment, i.e. with foreign students from various cultures in their classes, and with lecturers who indeed conduct all their courses in English.

In this paper, the term ‘foreign’ is therefore added to highlight the difference between Thai international students and foreign students studying in Thailand.

### 3.4. Internationalization of higher education in Thailand

Internationalization in higher education is in no respect a new or modern-day effect. It already began hundreds of years ago with the first universities in Europe since Latin was the common language and enabled exchange of ideas and networking among scholars (Engwall, 2016).

Gerald W. Fry and Hui Bi provide a detailed history of Thai education and the evolution of educational Reform in Thailand: The Thai educational paradox. (Fry & Bi, 2013).

A holistic overview of Thai higher education is provided by the World Economic Forum (Schwab, 2017a).

Rhein describes how Thai higher education began to change in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in reaction to the increased pace of modernization of the country, and to the presence of colonial forces (Rhein, 2017).

The first university in Thailand, Chulalongkorn University, was founded in 1917, followed by other universities in Bangkok. In the 1960s, regional public universities followed in the North, North-East, and South of Thailand, allowing the development from an elitist system to mass education (Schiller & Liefner, 2007).

Rhein describes the increasing publicity of international higher education programs over time and against the background of cultural expectations:

*“The rise of international higher education in Thailand gained momentum with the economic booms of the 1980s when the Thai phrase ‘go inter’ became common. To go inter is not only to study English or attend an international school, this phrase also implies that one is embracing international trends be they fashion, music, arts or culture. A Thai who is seen to have successfully adopted many Western cultural attributes and language skills has a corresponding increase in social status among [...]. This gradual Westernisation of the Thai students reflects similar trends in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Thai history when royal elites and civil servants were sent abroad to receive a Western education only to return home and be given key positions in military and government ministries. Both then and now, those who have received a Western education are often fast tracked through the bureaucracy and gain positions of power at a much faster rate than those who were educated within the Thai-speaking system.” (Rhein, 2016)*

Private higher education began only in the 1990s, but then quickly developed to over 50 institutions early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are many possible reasons for this rapid growth, but dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching at public universities and the limited seats available are likely to be on top of the list (Rhein, 2017).

Since the economic collapse in 1997, international higher education has increased dramatically in Thailand. The main reason is the probably the lack of funding that pressed Thai universities to find new sources of income. Meanwhile, the number of international programs started to decline, as the following table shows (OHEC, 2015, p. xiii ):

*Table 2 Number of international programs 2007-2014*

	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>
<b>Total</b>	844	884	981	1017	1045	769
<b>Bachelors</b>	277	296	342	344	336	249
<b>Masters</b>	327	350	389	394	438	290
<b>Doctorates</b>	220	215	225	249	247	224
<b>Others</b>	20	23	25	30	24	6

Almost 50 percent of Thailand higher education institutions are located in Bangkok where 10 percent of the population resides (Schwab, 2017a).

The Global Competitiveness Index ranks Thailand 32<sup>nd</sup> of 137 countries, but its higher education and training pillar only ranks 57<sup>th</sup>. Among the most problematic factors for doing business in Thailand, inefficient government bureaucracy ranks 2<sup>nd</sup>, inefficient capacity to innovate ranks 4<sup>th</sup>, and inadequately educated workforce ranks 6<sup>th</sup> (Schwab, 2017b, p. 286).

After more than 20 years of internationalization strategy supported by the Ministry of Education, the measurement of performance, outcomes and impact of internationalization has not been implemented on a large scale at the institutional or program levels in Thailand. The three most-cited barriers to internationalization amongst respondents are insufficient foreign language proficiency of students and

staff, insufficient financial resources, and lack of government support, next followed by limited student interest and limited faculty interest (McDermott, 2017, p. 57).

Overall, Thai education policy makers seem at times to be plagued by actionism, producing big education news where continuous processes would be more sufficient. The OECD-UNESCO report on Education in Thailand states:

*“Thailand has embarked on an ambitious series of reforms which go some way towards addressing these challenges. It has modernised its curriculum from a content-based one with an emphasis on rote learning, to a standards-based one describing what students should be able to know and do in each subject. Schools and teachers, however, have not always been given the support and skills they need to implement this new approach. The country has a comprehensive system of standardised national assessments but lacks the capacity to ensure that its national tests reinforce the aims of the curriculum and support reform efforts rather than undermine them. It has raised the qualification levels of its teachers and school leaders, yet questions on the quality of their training and ongoing development remain. It has also invested heavily in rolling out digital devices into schools but seen little improvement in computer literacy as a result.” (OECD/UNESCO, 2016).*

### 3.5. Challenges to internationalizing Thai higher education

One of the biggest challenges is the rapidly aging population and the lack of young people who want to attend higher education. Although a decline in birthrate is normal for developing countries, this happens in Thailand at such a high speed that the absolute numbers are impressive. Credit Suisse titled its article on the economic outcomes of a rapidly aging population ‘The Curious Case of Thailand’ (Gould, 2015). While most Asian countries have to battle rapid aging rates on a much lower rate than western countries, Thailand is a notable exception to that rule. According to The World Bank, it has together with China the highest share of elderly people of any developing country in East Asia and Pacific (“Thailand Economic Monitor - June 2016: Aging Society and Economy,” 2016). The following graph illustrates the state of the aging problem.

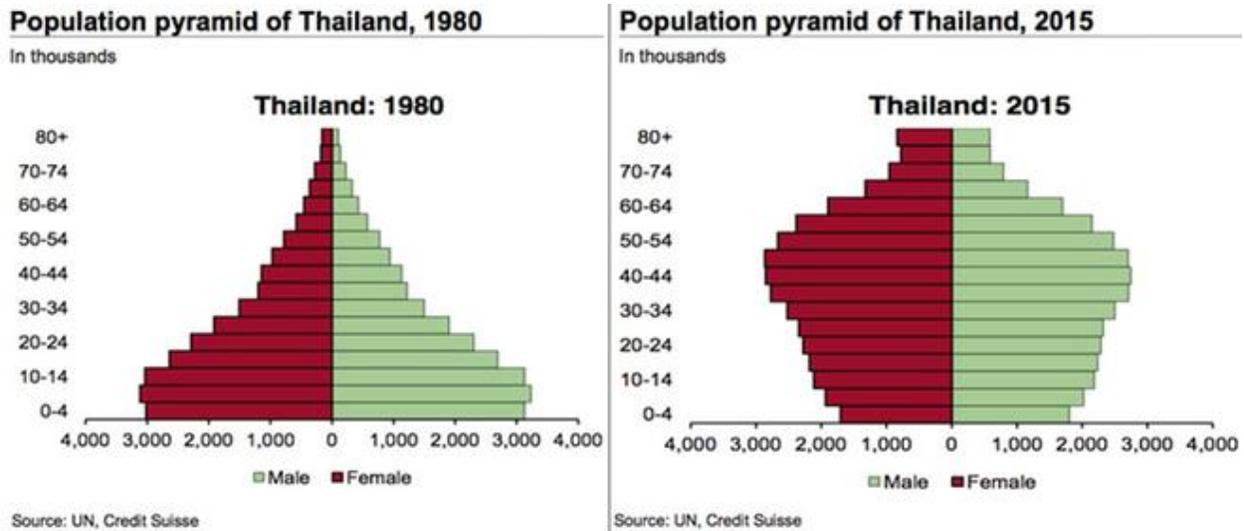


Figure 1 - Population Pyramid of Thailand 1980/2015 (Gould, 2015)

The Office of the Higher Education Commission, Ministry of Education, published the total enrollment at Thai higher education institutions in 2013 was 2.298.000 students. Within only two years, in 2015 the total enrollment dropped by almost 12% to 2.025.000 (OHEC, 2016). This trend will continue, as the following graph on fertility rates and life expectancy 1980-2012 shows:

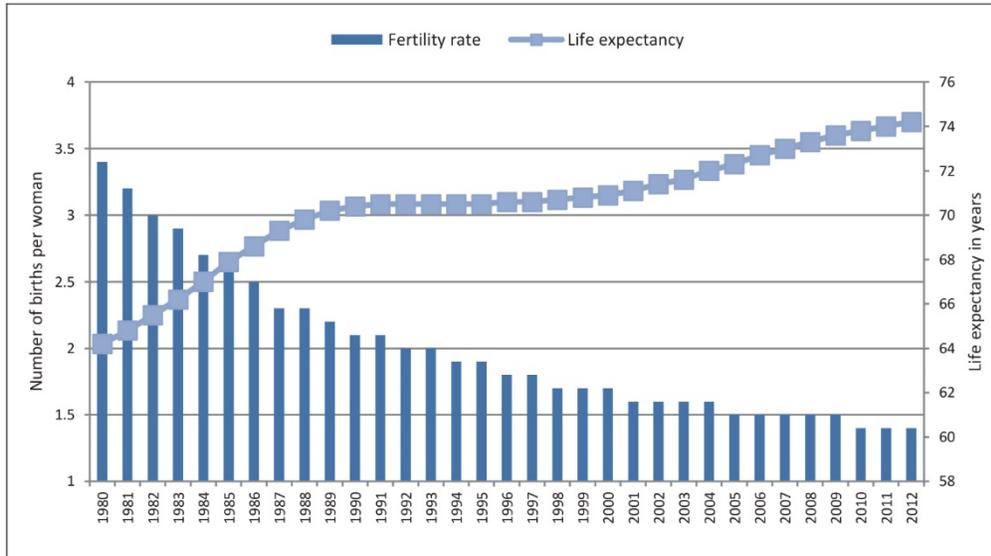


Figure 2 - Fertility rates (total births per woman) and life expectancy, 1980-2012 (OECD/UNESCO, 2016, p. 40)

Currently, the 1998/9 generation is entering university education in Thailand. Admission numbers will further decrease along with the decreased fertility rate. This effect may be strengthened by the degree in which vocational education better meets industry demands, thus ensuring a workplace after graduation.

There are other factors that may increase the effect of an aging population on student numbers at Thai universities, certainly including their international programs. A recent article in the Bangkok Post warned that up to 75% of higher education institutions might be forced to shut down, due to falling enrollment and increasing foreign competition. Such foreign competition was especially named by the plans of the Thai Government to allow foreign universities to establish branch campuses in newly assigned special economic zones outside Bangkok (Fredrikson, 2017).

Wilkins examines the effect the establishment of a branch campus may have and offers a framework based on analysing how home and host country stakeholders might be impacted by the establishment of an international branch campus – and how they might influence higher education institutions (Wilkins, 2016).

Thailand will soon face a big wave of online degree programs offered by top-notch international universities. Institutions like Pennsylvania State University, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Arden University, and many more vehemently advertise their online programs on Google and many Websites. Any branch campus will likely offer blended learning (UNESCO, 2017), as opposed to conventional lecture class settings, just as University of London announced in several fields in a current cooperation with Regent’s International College in Bangkok (“Thailand | University of London

International Programmes,” 2017). For an Internet-savvy generation, studying online may not be an obstacle.

How far the effect of even a strong wave of online education will be is disputed. Engwall, against the belief that international university rankings are a major source for student decision making, correctly points out:

*“Therefore, reputation plays a significant role in the choices of educational institutions by students. And this reputation is to a large extent based on the role of higher education as a selection mechanism of elites. So far these elites have tended to be strongly locally embedded. Therefore even in a globalized world, the local market tends to be the basic one for most institutions.”* (Engwall, 2016, p. 223)

While Engwall is certainly right for in-classroom degree programs, he exactly points out why these online programs offered by leading U.S. and U.K. universities are such a big threat to Thai universities. For generations, the affluent sent their children to study abroad since they could afford it (Rhein, 2017). Only those who could not afford that studied in Thailand. Thus, some foreign universities have a much higher reputation in Thailand than even the leading national universities, such as Mahidol, Chulalongkorn, or Thammasat University.

To give an example: Pennsylvania State University, better known as *Penn State*, ranks 77 in the Times Higher Education World Rankings 2018 (“Pennsylvania State University World University Rankings | THE,” 2018). In November 2017, its *Penn State World Campus* offers 125 online degree programs; its Web page highlights:

*“Our online courses are the same courses that we offer on campus. Therefore, your diploma will look no different from the one earned by students on our physical campus. It will not differentiate the method of delivery or state that your degree was earned online.”* (“Penn State Online | Why Penn State World Campus,” 2017)

Rodprayoon et.al. reported recently from Australia that the Open Universities consortium established by eight universities – Curtin, Griffith, La Trobe, Macquarie, Murdoch, RMIT, Swinburne and the University of South Australia – offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs in seven disciplines, i.e. Arts and Humanities, Business, Education, Health, Information Technology, Law and Justice, and Science and Engineering, leading to 44 undergraduate and 127 graduate degrees (Rodprayoon, Nuangjamnon, & Maj, 2017).

Ironically, any rapid closing of Thai higher education institutions would likely be to solve the problem where future professors will come from. Expected to be around 800 retirements per year, there are not enough doctoral students at Thai universities to replace the retirees, especially since only a tiny fraction of them chooses university teaching as their profession (Schwab, 2017, p. 17).

Rhein analyzed the obstacles Thai higher education faces in times when English proficiency, and thus international education, is becoming ever more important in ASEAN member states. Both geographically and socially, Thailand is in a center place to capitalize on the growing demand for international higher education. Rhein points to the areas, in which Thai higher education struggles: Demographics, quality attainment, diploma disease, internationalization and sociocultural issues which inhibit growth and standards within the international system (Rhein, 2017).

In 2005, Nilphan, in his examination of policy implementations in internationalizing Thai higher education, came to a similar conclusion:

*“The thesis argues that Thai higher education is in a dilemma: it must implement successful internationalisation and reform its structure and social values, particularly in order to accommodate new ideas driven by market forces. Yet, it is prevented because the bureaucratic structure and values of the 'state authority' and the public universities prevail, while the market pressurises each institution and individual to pursue their self-interests. As a result, qualitative internationalisation is difficult to put into practice.” (Nilphan, 2005)*

Schiller & Liefner examine how the unsatisfactory performance of Thai higher education in the past and recent pressures on competitiveness, good governance, and fiscal discipline have led to a series of funding reforms and changes in the Thai higher education system. They discuss changes with possible effects on universities' attitudes towards industrial relations and commercialization, and conclude that financial benefits for the universities as well as the technological benefits for the cooperating companies are both very limited (Schiller & Liefner, 2007).

In sum, these challenges tend to force Thai universities to be most market-oriented towards the mass of its customers – the students. As Rhein correctly states, that only widens the gap between what students like to study, and what employers are looking for:

*“The needs of the labor market are not being met as higher education programs prefer to focus on the more popular student friendly courses. This is a matter of survival from the universities perspective as offering a high level math or engineering program does not garner nearly the same levels of student interest as an entrepreneurship or media design program. The majority (60%) of students in Thai higher education study social sciences, business and law [...]. As the interests and motivations of students is much different from that of the industry [...], universities continue to see students as customers in a buyers' market, thus the problems of meeting national labor demands will continue unabated.” (Rhein, 2017)*

In the same paper, Rhein also identifies quality concerns, the diploma disease phenomenon, culture, politics and social instability as further challenges (Rhein, 2017). Suebnusorn analyses the commodification of higher education degrees, called *diploma disease*, in a comparative analysis of its developments before and after the 1999 education reform in Thailand (Suebnusorn, 2012).

The underlying problem is not the lack of funding. In 2013, the percentage of total government spending spent on education 18.9 percent (“World Bank Education Statistics - Country at a Glance - Thailand,” n.d.). It is the official mindset of being Thai that does not fit to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

*“The mindset is from the nation-building and Cold War period to produce obedient and nationalistic citizens, which does not fit the 21st-century needs,” said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a political scientist at Chulalongkorn University. “It is hierarchical, top-down, with a systematic lack of critical thinking.” (Ahuja, 2011)*

The British Council examined further trends leading to transformative changes in international higher education. Against the rapid aging trend in Thailand, for example, the African continent promises human capital with five out of the ten quickly growing 18 to 22 year old populations being in Africa; progress towards millennium goals yields further opportunities; countries increasingly link international

education strategies to trade and development; more targeted allocation of local education funding impacts international student mobility; corporate investments increasingly align with education interests; developing educational technology transforms learning; automation shifts workplace priorities through demand for special skills; the importance of 'brand' declines as the definition of 'value' grows more individualistic; the focus on English as the medium of instruction continues, but the importance of technology grows; and a shifting focus towards student experience puts an emphasis on the quality of welcome. British Council advises that education needs to prepare students for tomorrow's jobs and offer programs that will be and remain relevant and flexible in the future (Council, 2017).

Similarly, Maringe pointed out that students become increasingly consumerist when then the importance attached to labor market motives becomes more important than choosing a degree field based on personal interests or appreciation for a subject (Maringe, 2006).

Getting innovative in new curricula and program descriptions alone is not a sufficient survival strategy for universities. Choudaha examined three big waves that affect international student mobility between 1999 and 2020. He 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.

Rodprayoon et.al. point to the aspect that the level, how much and how fast online degree programs are accepted in Thailand, also depends on cultural expectations, without elaborating further (Rodprayoon et al., 2017). Certainly, not all Thai students will suddenly jump on the online train, but some will do, and how these 'some' may affect Thai universities can be shown at two short examples.

The first example is an online Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. MBA programs were long considered a money printing machine for Thai universities, explained by a simple calculation. If a program attracts 100 students in a batch, the cost for running this program are marginal while the income is almost complete profit, contributing to the overall budget of the higher education institution.

An international MBA program covers 36 to 42 credits, and the four cheapest ones are available between THB 208.530 and THB 240.000. The offer a thesis track (usually 12 credits) and an independent research track (usually 6 credits). That means on average that taught courses cover about 30 credits, i.e. 10 courses in classrooms. At cost of about THB 15.000 to THB 20.000 per three credits, the income from a 100 student batch is about THB 1.500.000 to THB 2.000.000 per course per batch (Werner, 2017h)<sup>5</sup>. What are the costs for such a course? One classroom for 48 hours, one lecturer for 48 hours, and 100 textbooks, which are often provided as a photocopy of the original textbook. Even in an expensive classroom, and with an expensive lecturer, and with an original textbook copy, the remaining profit is substantial.

Thai higher education institutions depend on such high-profit programs to cross-finance other programs that are financially not that successful. This is especially important for private higher education institutions which have no access to state subsidies.

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<sup>5</sup> For this overview, tuitions fees that apply to Thai nationals were used. In some programs, fees for foreign students may be higher.

A big part of the upcoming wave of online degree programs targets exactly these low-cost high-income programs, and every student opting for an online version is a student lost to Thai institutions. The attractiveness of an MBA program for an employed student certainly grows when such a program is advertised as ‘can be completed in 10 months’.

The second example shows how expensive equipment can be reduced that is required for some fields of study. A PhD in biochemistry, for example, needs sufficient laboratory equipment that causes high cost of purchase and maintenance to any university offering such a program.

University of Miami, ranked on position 186 in the 2018 Times Higher Education rankings (“University of Miami - World University Rankings 2018 | Times Higher Education (THE),” n.d.), offers its online Executive PhD in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology with the following introduction:

*“The Executive Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree program in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology is targeted toward full-time professionals working in industry or other research laboratories who are involved in research at their workplace but do not have a PhD. These individuals do not need to give up their jobs to enroll in this PhD program.*

*Research performed at the industrial site will serve as the dissertation research topic. The required courses will be done through distance learning technology. This program is available to professionals who are working in the areas of biochemistry, molecular biology, biotechnology, nanotechnology, and medicine. It is intended to help individuals who are seeking to either move ahead in their field or switch careers altogether. It also fulfills the lifelong learning desire of industrial professionals who wish to further their education at the graduate level.”* (“Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Miller School of Medicine,” n.d.)

This way, additional income from teaching may be reached without further investment into existing laboratories while reducing the potential target group for scientific Thai university programs by another few students.

### 3.6. Cost of international programs at Thai universities

While Rhein states that the cost of international education in Thailand limits access to the wealthy and upper middle-class, this cannot be confirmed. International 4-year Bachelor degree programs start at THB 208.000 (Werner, 2017a), international Master degree programs at THB 100.000 (Werner, 2017c), and international Ph.D. programs start at THB 249.600 (Werner, 2017b), all at Mae Fah Luang University. The international undergraduate program offered by Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand largest, and a public open university, comes at a total fee of THB 240.000 (Werner, 2017a). These price tags are far less prohibitive than they may have been fifteen years ago and allow lower middle-class families to send their children to international study.<sup>6</sup>

Schiller & Liefner, taking the perspective of university funding, state that the teaching activities, as one core function of universities, is still in the transit from an elite system to a mass system (Schiller & Liefner, 2007). This may at least in parts explain the stunning fee differences for a Bachelor in business

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<sup>6</sup> All fees mentioned apply to foreign students. Fees for Thai nationals are lower at some institutions.

fields, which are the preferred field of study of foreign students at Thai universities (OHEC, 2017). Prices for a full Bachelor degree program in business range from THB 240.000 at Ramkhamhaeng University, up to THB 1.584.000 at Webster University Thailand (Werner, 2017g).

However, looking at the continuum of fees, Rhein is right when he states:

*“However, international programmes in Thai higher education continue to set tuition fees often at five times the rate of a Thai programme which is assisted by state funds. This has led to a sudden increase in the availability of international programmes for those who can afford this pricey alternative to a college education. This trend of full-fee programmes continues to date. As international programmes compete for market share, Thailand has experienced the introduction of twinning programmes such as the highly successful Sasin programme at Chulalongkorn University, which is in partnership with Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. [...] The cost of such programmes is far beyond the reach of middle-class Thai families.”* (Rhein, 2016)

### 3.7. Language, culture, and other hurdles

An international program in Thai higher education is commonly understood as a degree program conducted in the English language as the international *lingua franca*, with few other teaching languages far and between (German, Arabic, Chinese, for example). Generally, international program means studying all courses in English, rather than in Thai.

Thailand is not a native speaker of this *lingua franca*, and so are the majority of lecturers and students. This points to a major challenge of all programs conducted in English in any non-native speaking country of the world. How much content can a non-native speaking lecturer express when teaching in English, and how much content can a non-native speaking student understand when taught in the English language?

Research from Sweden, the second-ranking country in the 2017 EF English Proficiency Index (*EF English Proficiency Index 2017*, 2017), has shown how Swedish lecturers and students estimate how much content they can express or receive:

*“A study reported by the member of the Swedish Academy, Kjell Espmark, thus claims that about 50% of the message is lost when Swedish university faculty teach in English. This is based on a study where first the teachers were asked how much less they can express themselves when lecturing in English instead of Swedish, and gave the answer 70%. When the students in the same study were asked how much they understand, when the teacher is speaking English instead of Swedish, they also answered 70%. As a result, just 49% is communicated.”* (Engwall, 2016, p. 226)

So much about the country with the second-highest level of English proficiency. In the same report, Thailand ranks 53 out of 80 countries (Set, 2017, p. 22). This makes it even more important to have as many foreign (non-native speakers of Thai) students in the classroom, since friendships and team work certainly increase the application of the English language on a daily basis, and thus the proficiency level of the individual student.

Based on the first systematic study of value systems ever conducted in Thailand, Suntaree Komin concluded almost 30 years ago:

*When consider the knowledge related Instrumental value of being educated which secures a significantly higher priority in the Thai people's cognition, it signifies that the Thai are interested in knowledge more in terms of form and functional value of enhancing the educated person's advancement in career, rather than in terms of acquiring knowledge for knowledge sake. (Komin, 1990, p. 150)<sup>7</sup>*

Although Komin's findings may not apply that much anymore to the current generation of Thai university students, it obviously applies to those previous generations to which the lecturers at Thai universities belong. The World Economic Forum therefore criticizes:

*"Traditional educational systems, in which the teacher is the main "source" of knowledge, are ill-suited to equip people to work and live in a knowledge economy. Some of the competencies such a society demands—teamwork, problem solving, motivation for lifelong learning—cannot be acquired in a setting in which teachers convey facts to students whose main task is to learn them in order to be able to repeat them. A lifelong learning system must be competency driven. Within traditional institutional settings, countries must develop new curricula and new teaching methods to adapt. Anecdotal data from Thailand indicates that teaching and learning approaches in higher education institutions rely primarily on faculty-centered approaches, with limited opportunities for student independent work, problem solving or group projects. Providing people with the tools they need to function in the knowledge economy requires adoption of a new pedagogical model." (Schwab, 2017, p. 54)*

Similarly, Rhein states:

*"When Thai educators discuss internationalisation, there is a sense of necessity to keep up with the trends and to stay modern and yet, there is also an undercurrent of fear and anxiety regarding the unintended impact and possible erosion of the much-cherished Thai culture." (Rhein, 2016)*

Later in the same paper, Rhein explains in more detail:

*"Balancing Westernisation with Localisation and the potential decline of Thainess: one potentially problematic issue with the continued expansion of international programmes in the Thai context is that the students who graduate from international programmes are often not representative of Thai cultural expectations. As Winichaiikul (2000) argued, since the age of colonisation, Thais have been attempting to become 'siwilai'— a Thai word meaning civilised – through the emulation of Western models. Western education systems and Thai education systems have different values and students who graduate from Thai international programmes often have problems readjusting to a primarily Thai environment which promotes patronage, social hierarchy, social status derived through ascription and high power distance (Rhein 2013)<sup>8</sup>. Since the economic collapse of 1997, the promotion of Thainess has become commonplace, as*

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<sup>7</sup> As Komin states, "Values do change throughout life. It is not completely stable, which allows individual and social change to take place. However, they do not change overnight." (Komin, 1990, p. 24)

<sup>8</sup> See (Rhein, 2013).

*many fear that Thailand is losing all that it means to be Thai. Thus, from the corporate view, these students are outliers, whereas from the sociocultural view, these students are outcasts. The concern of maintaining Thainess is further confounded by the internationalisation of the curriculum, which may have an adverse impact on local knowledge. The Thai higher education system has always borrowed from foreign systems in terms of curriculum, course design and more recently, total quality assurance frameworks and key performance indicators for faculty and administration; yet, there is also a claim to Thai uniqueness and exceptionalism.” (Rhein, 2016)*

Culture, as the end-product of a society, is a living thing and is as such permanently changing. Pimpa examined how the new generation in public organizations is different from the stereotype well known from literature on Thai culture and management; still, avoiding conflict and uncertainties remain a key characteristic (Pimpa, 2012).

#### 4. Methodology

This research project will use the qualitative research methodology of narrative interviewing as the method of data elicitation (Jovchelovith & Bauer, 2000; Kvernbekk, 2013). In recorded face-to-face interviews, individual students or focus groups of foreign students are presented with motivating questions that trigger storytelling.

Before starting the interview, the respondent will be introduced to the aim of the research, the anonymity of her/his responses (Sikes, 2010). Ethical research principles require ‘informed consent’ from the respondent. The respondent, however, cannot be viewed as informed before she/he knows what will be asked (Etherington, 2007). Therefore, the respondent will be informed that she/he can end the interview any time.

The respondent also will be informed that any insights and collected data drawn from the respondent’s narrative will then be the research data used in this project.

The interview will start with some factual questions on nationality, gender, age, and to fill another knowledge gap, expenditure for the student’s education, accommodation, and cost of living. All collected data are necessary for the researcher to evaluate the results, but they remain strictly confidential and are not to be published in any way that the individual could possibly be identified. If necessary, fictionalization will be used to protect the identities of all participants in the project (V. Caine et al., 2016).

If the respondent asks a question to the researcher, this will only be answered after the narrative part of the interview is finished. The respondent will be instructed accordingly. This prevents reflexivity and relationship-building during the interview, which only would negatively affect the possible findings.

In case the respondent is known to the researcher, i.e. as a student in his courses student or as his colleague, the respondent will be assured that the narratives will not have any repercussions to the relationship, nor will they be used in any form outside this research project.

All interviews will be conducted in English. Jovchelovith and Bauer point out the importance of using language wisely in narrative interview:

*"[...] language, as the medium of exchange, is not neutral but constitutes a particular worldview. Appreciating difference in perspectives, which can be either between interviewer and informant or between different informants, is central to the technique. The interviewer is advised to carefully avoid imposing any form of language not used by the informant during the interview."* (Jovchelovith & Bauer, 2000)

The basic phases of a narrative interview are described by Jovchelovith and Bauer:

Phases	Rules
Preparation	Exploring the field Formulating exmanent questions
1 Initiation	Formulating initial topic for narration Using visual aids
2 Main narration	No interruptions Only non-verbal encouragement to continue storytelling Wait for the coda
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

Table 3 - Basic phases of the narrative interview (Jovchelovith & Bauer, 2000)

Exmanent questions are what the researcher or interviewer is interested in. These need to be translated, however, into vocabulary and dictus of the respondent, thus turning them into immanent questions. Not all exmanent questions can be translated, e.g. when the respondent's narration does not offer any anchoring point for translation (Atkinson, Bauer, & Gaskell, 2000, p. 356).

Schütze proposes to analyze narratives in six steps (cited in: Jovchelovith & Bauer, 2000). The first step is a detailed and high-quality transcription of the recorded verbal material.

The second step separates the transcribed text into indexical and non-indexical material. Indexical statements give concrete reference to 'who did what, where, and why'. Non-indexical go beyond the facts and express values, judgements and opinions. Non-indexical statements can be either descriptive or argumentative. Descriptive statements express how an event was felt and experienced, to the values and opinions attached to the event, and to the usual and ordinary. Argumentative statements point out the legitimization of what was not taken for granted in the narrative or in the chain of events, and include statements in the form of general theories and concepts about the event.

The third step uses all the indexical components of the transcribed text to analyze the order of vents for each individual, an outcome that Schütze calls 'trajectories'.

In the fourth step, the non-indexical statements are investigated as 'knowledge analysis'. These opinions, concepts and general theories, reflections, and the separations between the usual and the

unusual, are together the foundation on which to construct narrative theories, which are then compared with elements of the narrative as they represent the self-understanding of the respondent.

The fifth step is the clustering of and comparison between, individual trajectories.

In the sixth and final step, individual trajectories are put into context and similarities are established, often through extreme case comparison. This process allows for the recognition of collective trajectories.

The evaluation is expected to be done by the researcher. Depending on the findings, reflecting teams might be set up to support the evaluation of the transcribed texts (Speedy, 2008).

In addition to narrative interviews, simple anonymous online surveys will be conducted on social networks to collect some indicators for future research and test the narrative (encouraging) quality of future interview questions.

The first survey, titled 'Experiences from International Higher Education Programs in Thailand' ran from 15 April to 30 May 2017 (Werner, 2017f) and showed that for some students, the program office is clearly seen as a dimension of international in such a program. They harshly criticized the request for obedience as shown by the administration staff. The survey provided different sets of questions for students. Resident lecturers, and visiting lecturers.

The second survey, titled 'Expenses of foreign students at Thai universities' runs since 13 November 2017 (ongoing) and aims to collect initial data on the expenditure of foreign students for their studies, their accommodation (including all accommodation related costs), and their cost of living (including all other cost positions). These data may allow for an initial calculation of how much is the value of an average foreign student to Thai economy (Werner, 2017e).

The third survey 'Do you want to study your degree on campus or online? Tell us!' began on 27 November 2017 and is ongoing. It aims to get a first idea of the readiness of students in Thailand to study an online degree program, instead of attending an on-campus program in Thailand or abroad (Werner, 2017d).

## 5. About the Researcher

After careers as an entrepreneur in Germany, and in management in Germany and Switzerland, the researcher moved to Thailand to teach in international higher education programs at Ramkhamhaeng University's Institute of International Studies (IIS-RU) since 2002. Over the recent years, his classes consisted of up to 50 percent foreign students from all over the world ("About IIS - Student Numbers 2016," n.d.); this is where his intrinsic interest in the experiences of foreign students in international Thai higher education comes from. In addition, he completed teaching and administrative assignments at Asian University, Burapha University, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), and Thammasat University. The researcher holds two *Diplom* degrees from Germany, one in Computer Science (01/98) and one in Business Administration (08/98). In 2001, he co-authored with his thesis-supervising professor the book 'Schutz vor Rechtsproblemen im Internet – Handbuch für deutsche Unternehmen', in English 'Protection from legal problems on the Internet – Handbook for German organizations' (Zimmerling & Werner, 2001). In 2004, he presented his paper 'Balancing Globalisation and Localisation' to the SEAMEO-UNESCO Education Conference in Bangkok (Werner, 2004). Since 2008,

the researcher runs the non-commercial Web site <https://studyinthailand.org> to attract foreign students to Thailand and Thai students to international programs. Since then, the site attracted over 1.2m unique visitors (according to Google Analytics). International schools in Thailand are presented on <https://internationalschoolsbangkokthailand.org> since 2011.

## 6. Expected Research Outcomes

- Insights into experiences from and opinions about international programs from the major foreign protagonists (i.e., students, resident lecturers, and visiting scholars). How 'international' are the programs they are in?
- Insights from Thai students why they opted for an international program over a national one, and what their experiences are with foreign fellow students in the classroom.
- Insights on the economic value of an average foreign student at a Thai university, derived from the student's spending on education, accommodation, and living expenses.
- Insights about experiences of exchange students from short-term attendance in international programs. After returning home, will they recommend it to their peers?
- Insights about the motivation of foreign students to choose a particular program/university combination over other options available in their choice process, or in other words, why did they opt to study in Thailand?

## 7. Dissemination

The complete findings are supposed to be published in a monograph. Particular aspects, such as expenditure of foreign students, are supposed to be published in academic journals and presented to related conferences.

To allow for a wider audience, some aspects may also be published in newspapers and magazines, taking the form of opinion articles.

The transcribed and anonymized responses will be made available in digital format to other researchers on request, certainly free of charge.

## 8. Summaries and Conclusions

While enrollment numbers at Thai higher education institutions continue to decrease, international programs at Thai universities have serious growth potential. To attract the new generation of more skills-aware Thai students, international programs need to attract foreign students first, in order to increase learning on a global perspective and to motivate utilizing English language as a daily means of communication.

Institutions have little information at hand about what foreign students do and want, nor what students think about their programs who are already enrolled.

This knowledge gap is urgent for Thai higher education institutions, and for policy makers alike. This research project aims to fill that gap through narrative interviews. Time needed to provide first sound results is expected to be 12 months. Completion of the whole research project may need 24 months.

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