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Power imbalances: Inequality in international exchange

The UK and Thailand as example

Abstract

Student mobility through bilateral exchange agreements between institutions plays an increasing role in university internationalization agendas, but what this means in practice varies across institution types and around the world. These agreements, most often between a university in a 'developed' English speaking country, and one in a 'developing' non-English speaking country highlight disparities in funding, access, and responsibility, leading to concerns about their place and their impact on not just higher education, but global systems.

This chapter will explore these realities by taking a case-study approach looking at two partner institutions, one in the UK and one in Thailand, and considering their internationalization programs, similarities and differences between them and their subsequent impact. We investigate to what extent arrangements such as these are ethical, and we will conclude our chapter with a summary of the implications and pitfalls of such programs, with particular focus on the responsibilities of Western universities to contribute to having meaningful, equal collaborations to support the internationalization of higher education.

Introduction

Internationalization is increasingly a part of higher education institutions' agendas, with student mobility playing an increasing role. However, what this means in practice varies across institution types and around the world. A common form is bilateral exchange agreements between institutions, most often between a university in a 'developed' English speaking country, and one in a 'developing' non-English speaking country.

Despite the noble goals of such agreements, and the prevailing idea that universities are international by nature (Neale, Spark, & Carter, 2018; Snodin, 2019), many provide more benefit to the more dominant Western university, where they send students and faculty to the non-Western institution for an international experience that cannot be mirrored on the Western campus, due to financial, political, or other restraints. There are many concerns that arise when considering these institutional agreements including issues of funding for education in each country, and implications for access; and the impact of unequal participation between the institutions, specifically who holds responsibility for addressing this inequality.

This chapter will explore these realities by taking a case-study approach looking at two partner institutions, one in the UK and one in Thailand, and considering the context of their internationalization programs, and their impact, where we interrogate to what extent arrangements such as these are ethical. As such, we will begin by providing an overview of internationalization in higher education and on exchange programs as part of this, before introducing our case-study institutions. We will discuss the program and its outcomes and implications before concluding our chapter with a summary of the implications and pitfalls of such programs, with particular focus on the responsibilities of Western universities to contribute

to having meaningful, equal collaborations to support the internationalization of higher education.

Internationalization Agendas in Higher Education

Before continuing to our discussion of student exchange agreements and their role in internationalization it is necessary for us to first situate our understanding of this broad concept, on which there is often confusion (Porntip & Chotima, 2018). Internationalization has been defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2015, p. 2). It relates to all areas in which the university acts and the units or individuals involved, including internal and external aspects (Neale, Spark, & Carter, 2018).

Yet Stromquist (2007) emphasizes a difference between this *internationalization* and *internationalism*, stating that the latter is more a focus on global learning while internationalization is evidenced by increased international presence of dominant political and economic powers, acting through business principles such as marketing and competition. Knight (2012) also emphasizes important distinctions between globalization, related to the marketization and competition for resources worldwide, and internationalization, but concedes they are closely related and influence one another; such as in the self-interested focus on academic reputation and prestige that is tied up in the internationalization agenda (Neale, Spark, & Carter, 2018; Seeber et al., 2016). Rattana (2015) discussed influences on academic systems due to globalization in the context of policy borrowing and lending, whereby non-Western countries may selective choose and apply policy, without consideration of the appropriateness of said policy for their context.

Traditionally, Western institutions have favored a Euro-centric model of internationalization, emphasizing and replicating these models of knowledge and learning to the neglect of Asia, Africa, and much of the Americas (Rattana, 2020; Robbins & Orr, 2004; Ayoubi & Al-Habaibeh, 2006). However, with the continuously increasing formalization of tertiary education and focus on the transferability of educational credits globally (Knight, 2009) comes an increase in agency from these non-Western institutions. Increasingly common as well are Western institutions opening branch campuses abroad, most prominently throughout Asia (Rattana, 2015; Stromquist, 2007). This has something of a 'colonizing' effect, going against the notion that "internationalization is intended to complement, harmonize, and extend the local dimension—not to dominate it" (Knight, 2012, p. 1).

Knight and de Wit (2018) recognize the economic and political impetus for higher education internationalization, but note "academic and social/ cultural motivations are not increasing in importance at the same rate" (p. 3). Study abroad has been found to increase social inequality within countries, and a Bourdieusian reading emphasizes how social capital affects study abroad opportunities (Netz & Finger, 2016), with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds being more inclined to develop "a habitus . . . in which it is considered 'normal' to travel, and an associated degree of confidence in dealing with new cultures" (Brooks & Waters 2010, p. 148).

The cultural value of internationalizing campuses hinges on exposing students to cultures other than their own and the political value of creating 'ambassadors' for the receiving country and institution where overseas students return to their home countries (Chankseliani, 2018). Woolf (2007) suggests that the credible rationale necessary to justify programs in non-traditional locations would also result in an increase of domestic programs for the study of these cultures or

languages. We would argue that this is a fallacy. Building, staffing, and recruiting for full

domestic academic programs is costly, whereas an exchange agreement with an institution

already providing relevant tuition poses a more fiscally accessible alternative. A history of

successful exchanges in such a location may then provide the impetus required for an expansion

of study on that topic in Western institutions.

Internationalization in the UK

Goals of internationalization are almost ubiquitous throughout UK higher education and can be

tied to a number of factors including the establishment of the ERASMUS mobility program, the

status of international students, changes in research foci, and, most visibly, government funding

cuts and the subsequent need for additional revenue streams (Ayoubi & Al-Habaibeh, 2006).

Specifically focusing on university exchange, the Bologna Process is a series of

agreements intended to ensure comparable standards in higher education across the European

Higher Education Area, resulting in a standardized number of credits for a Bachelor or Master's

degree and suitability for doctoral study. This framework has allowed exchange agreements, like

ERASMUS, the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students

program established in 1987, to prosper. However, it is important to note that this process has

met with some hesitance, most relevantly with questions about the ethics of replacing

contextually appropriate higher education forms in smaller systems with those more akin to

European nations. As Woolf states, "Educational systems are not neutral; they reflect and, in

some cases, create a national ethos" (2007, p. 498), and agreements such as the Bologna Process

may be seen to threaten this.

Internationalization in Thailand

For Thailand, internationalization, and indeed the creation of what we find their university system to be as a whole, has been influenced by Western conceptions of what these ideas mean (Rattana, 2015). The majority of the developments in Thai internationalization that are immediately germane to this chapter have occurred in the past several decades, primarily since a loan to the Thai government from the Asian Development Bank necessitated a move to restructure the education system to respond to market demands and improve access (Porntip & Chotima, 2018). Arising from this restructuring was the ability of a number of Thai universities to increase their autonomy, enabling them to open more spaces and increase fees, in turn attracting more qualified staff (Rattana, 2020). This supports the turn toward "educational massification and commercialization" (Porntip & Chotima, 2018, p. 296).

Rattana (2020) describes three main premises within the operation of the Thai state, namely "externalisation strategy, aspiration to modernity and selective borrowing" (p. 319) and cites a tendency for these to be achieved through reference to or emulation of specifically selected facets of Western models. Paitoon (2005) maintains that Thai universities have traditionally replicated Western norms of teaching and knowledge growth, to the neglect of that of Thai culture. The spread of English as an international language has colored program development in Thailand, motivated by a need to develop a suitable level of proficiency for economic success, with the idea that international programs will result in the development of greater English proficiency (Rattana, 2020). The use of English "characterizes the feature of 'internationalization' of higher education in Thailand" (Rattana, 2015, p. 79) and Snodin (2019) equates this language use with the suppression of Thai values. Porntip and Chotima (2018) note

that it is misleading to equate the use of English to internationalization, warning that translating curricula from Thai to English cannot be seen as sufficient in these goals.

Exchange Agreements as a Means to Internationalization

While there are a number of methods relied upon for internationalization strategies, one of the most visible is exchange agreements between universities, made through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which typically includes the strategic aims and objectives of the agreement, as well as the type (student, faculty, research, etc.) of exchange, its regularity, financial responsibly, and more (Ayoubi & Al-Habaibeh, 2006). Though it is not rare for these agreements to be lacking in detail, or for differences in things such as the academic calendars to make it difficult to fulfill them (Rattana, 2015).

Discussions of exchange agreements tend to revolve around the student dimension. An academic term abroad has been a common facet of international mobility for almost a century with Junior Year Abroad programs, but participation in these programs remains relatively low (Knight, 2009). In response to this Neale, Spark, and Carter (2018) advocate for the development of an increased portfolio of "short-term 'field-trip' style activities" (p. 176), similar to what will be presented in this chapter.

Theoretical Framework

With the increased focus within Western higher educational contexts on the global south (Woolf, 2007) there is a renewed importance of some of the foundational theories within the field of internationalization. Altbach (2004) described a center and periphery model, where "academic centres" (p. 7), typically wealthier countries, set the standard, providing leadership in scholarship

and the dissemination of knowledge, while those at the periphery are positioned to "depend on the centres for research, the communication of knowledge, and advanced training" (p. 8). This theory serves to highlight the differences or disparities between universities, and in some respects national systems of higher education, including fiscal and human resources. In this chapter we view the UK as a center system, supported by its status as a leader in education and knowledge creation for centuries, and Thailand as a peripheral system, evidenced by the rapid development it has undergone in the past half century. We use this lens as we explore our case and discuss implications and recommendations emerging from it.

Case Study

Holding to the notion that "our experiences are rooted in context" (Merriam, 1998, p. 31), we must first acknowledge the contextual influences that may act upon an exchange agreement (Neale, Spark, & Carter, 2018). Because of this, we have identified a qualitative case study as the most effective methodology for our work. Merriam (1998) describes a case as "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27). Case study allows us to present and unpack an exchange agreement between one UK and one Thai university. In explaining the value of this methodology, Stromquist (2007) posits, "Case study approaches bring to life the interrelated parts of an organization while enabling us to see the interplay between the organization and its environment" (p. 85). This ability to elaborate upon the motivations and behaviors of the actors involved allows us to relate them to the broader goals of internationalization this chapter is concerned with.

By taking this approach, we not only present details of one particular international link between institutions, we also shine a light on an area of interest to those working in higher

education, providing a vicarious experience for the reader which allows them to use their own knowledge and experience to understand the phenomenon (Simons, 2009, p.23). Bartlett & Vavrus (2017) propose the comparative case study approach allowing researchers to "focus on tracing the phenomenon of interest in a study across sites" (p. 6). In our example, we look at the phenomenon of international cooperation between two study sites and compare the impact of the program in each.

The case study institutions were selected because of the authors' own experiences of them. [Author] is employed by Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU) in the UK, and [author] by Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University (NRRU) in Thailand, and both have contributed to visits between the partner institutions. It is not claimed that the experiences outlined here are necessarily replicated in every partnership program between the UK and Thailand, but we hope that it provides an illustrative example.

Characteristic of most MOUs of this type, the MOU between BGU and NRRU includes, among other points:

1. Facilitation of university staff exchanges or mutual visits to both institutions;

2. Student exchange and/or visiting programmes;

3. The exchange of information, including the results of teaching and research collaboration

The case primarily relates to a program that falls into point 2, though university staff did accompany the student visit group.

The Institutions

UK

Bishop Grosseteste University is a small institution located in a largely rural area of the UK.

Many of its degree programs are focused on teacher education, and more than a third of students

come from the two lowest quintiles on the indices of multiple deprivation, with 64% of the

student body meeting one or more widening participation criteria. The UK case-study university

has, as a core strategic aim, the continuing internationalization of the institution. In recent years,

the university has developed TESOL provision at both undergraduate and graduate level. As

part of the university's 2014-19 strategy, it included in its mission a commitment to

"Develop[ing] productive partnerships to extend and deepen our external contribution regionally,

nationally and internationally" (Bishop Grosseteste University, 2014, p.4). Internationalization

was one of eight core themes built in to the strategy, with stated intentions including

internationalizing the curriculum, facilitating staff and student mobility and building "a

programme of mutually beneficial developmental projects and links with a selected range of

partners" (Bishop Grosseteste University, 2014, p. 10). The new TESOL programs were a logical

way to support this aim, and have been designed to include an element of international mobility

for both staff and students.

Thailand

Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University is a large government funded doctoral university in the

northeast of Thailand. The institution has operated for over 100 years, converting into a

university in 2004 and offers a wide range of degrees to about 20,000 students, the majority of

whom are from the local area and nearby provinces. Since 2010, the university has intentionally

focused on internationalization by promoting student mobility and the use of English in many different projects. The strategy was also a part of preparation for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Community in 2015. At present, the university also has strategies to elevate the level of English competencies of its students to improve employability, both in and outside Thailand. One of the main missions of the university is to produce teachers for schools, and in light of the internationalization strategy, the board of the Bachelor of Education in English program offers opportunities for students to be exposed to different experiences that allow them to use the English language, especially with native English speakers.

The Program

The structure of the exchange was such that the visiting institution was responsible for travel to and from the host country and the cost of accommodation, while the host institution was responsible for the remainder, including visits and educational experiences, transport and booking accommodation. BGU students were offered the opportunity to visit Thailand, and three first year BA TESOL & Linguistics students joined nine BA Special Educational Needs & Inclusion students on the program. While the twenty Thai participants were enrolled on a 5-year BEd English Education program and were mostly fourth year students, meaning that they had a good command of English, while being native speakers of Thai.

Thai students were assigned to run activities as part of the course they were taking. In their standard classes, English is used often, however the opportunity to converse with native speakers is considerably more rare. The exchange project represents an opportunity for these students to use English and expand their intercultural connections. This visit allowed UK

students to experience Thai culture, visit historical and tourist sites, and develop relationships with Thai peers and undertake both teaching and learning in the university.

There were workshops where Thai students taught Thai language through games and activities and UK students and lecturers conducted a session to teach English. Both groups of students had a chance to talk and enjoy activities together. Thai students were able to meet UK students and show them their country, explain customs and translate for them. There was no opportunity in advance for the UK students to learn any Thai language.

Outcomes of the Program

This visit led to increased confidence, a broader outlook and improvements to their levels of intercultural competence for both UK and Thai participants. Thai students benefited from meeting and interacting with English-speaking peers, both on a social and educational level. They were able to act as hosts, display hospitality and provide linguistic support, as well as benefiting from short lessons taught by their visitors.

The biggest benefit was arguably to the UK students, who experienced another culture first-hand, and had an experience very far removed from their quotidian university life and teaching. Although they did not gain beyond a small smattering of Thai language, comments they made after the visit suggested that they felt they had made substantial gains in terms of social and cultural capital. One UK student described the visit as "very inspirational" and another as "a life changing journey to experience another culture." These benefits, whilst certainly applying to students from both universities, are limited by the financial impossibility of a reciprocal visit. The UK students were very aware that they would be unlikely to be able to host their new friends at their home university and would be similarly unlikely to be as

hospitable hosts should the opportunity arise. The Thai students were also aware of the unlikelihood of a return visit.

For the Thai students, this was one of several visits that they had from international partners during their studies. Each visit brought new people, accents and friendships, whether short-lived or lasting. However, each group of visitors took away completely new cultural experiences. Many of Thai students said that the exchange was positive because both students from countries had a chance to learn each other's culture. However, the majority of Thai students said that the time was too short to develop their English skills, though they did develop confidence and listening skills.

Implications

Accepting that this case study and exchange agreement will not directly reflect all similar agreements, there are a number of matters arising from it—both positive and negative—that can be extrapolated. Key issues to consider include the initial creation of these agreements and how they persist, the use of language, and divergent funding models and their impact on learners.

Development of Agreements

Many existing exchange agreements in universities around the world are remnants of personal relationships between faculty members who have long since left these institutions (Robbins & Orr, 2004; Neale, Spark, & Carter, 2018). This often leads to a lack of defined direction or goal for the programs and a lack of the administrative support necessary to ensure their efficacy. In our case exchange the goals are clear and the participating faculty have maintained strong relationships outside of the actual exchange period, beginning with a faculty trip in advance of

the student visit where four staff members taught staff and students of the host institution. Ayoubi and Al-Habaibeh (2006) found that university staff generally view "student exchange as the core objective of these partnerships" (p. 386) while a similar exchange in faculty tends to be on "a very small scale" (p. 387). We can trace many of the successes of the visit directly to the initial faculty visit and suggest this model be a standard in the development of MOUs.

Neale, Spark, and Carter (2018) emphasized the importance of "build[ing] progressively on [the institution's] capabilities" (p. 174). We support this notion and reject a call from some (i.e. Snodin, 2019) for nationalized internationalization strategies. Rattana (2015) speaks of concerns of a current focus within Thailand on the quantity of MOUs signed versus their quality, further hindering their ability to shift to a Thailand-centric value education internationalization model. In this case study we can find a clear connection between the academic programs of both parties, and we would encourage others to only pursue exchange in such instances, relying on both student and faculty characteristics to evaluate the appropriateness and efficacy of existing and future programs.

Language

A further aspect to be considered is the power of language, as Phan Le Ha (2008) criticizes our "tendency to assume the spread of English as inevitable and natural" (p. 71). Imbalances exist in linguistic competence and exposure between the two groups of students; while UK students had the upper hand in being able to use their first language, with which they have greater mastery, in the classroom and other contexts, Thai students had the advantage in being able to move between their guest colleagues and the wider university and social structures, with their full command of Thai and growing proficiency in English. For the UK, with its uneasy imperial past and

unwilling approach to multilingualism, the inequity arising from this is a particularly pertinent issue.

It is common in Thailand for a program to be labeled as international simply due to the use of English in the teaching (Porntip & Chotima, 2018), despite the fact "that English proficiency continues to be very limited in Thailand" (Rattana, 2015, p. 89-90) for faculty and students, resulting in the continuation of the traditional Thai style or rote learning, just in the English language (Rattana, 2020). As such, programs developed through these exchange agreements almost invariably rely on English as the language of instruction and interaction (Robbins & Orr, 2004; Snodin, 2019). Because of its use as an international lingua franca, and the emphasis placed on it by Thailand as the working language of ASEAN (Porntip & Chotima, 2018), this will not be surprising, however it does have the effect of fostering a sense of inequality between partners. No matter the level of proficiency of the non-native learners, they are being placed into the role of the 'other', even when the exchange is taking place in their home domain, promoting lasting influences of Western hegemony, and sanctioning a sort of educational colonization.

We support a move toward a more value-centered model of international exchange, respecting the academic and cultural traditions of both parties equally, where English should be a "complimentary skill" (Porntip & Chotima, 2018, p. 302). Higher education in general, and particularly in Thailand, "is known to be highly structured and hierarchical with overwhelming bias towards benefitting the upper and upper middle class" (Rattana, 2015, p. 90) and current internationalization practices are seen to exacerbate this in their neglect of Thai values. Combating this, in the case study exchange host students were able to organize culture sessions for the UK students, showcasing Thai dance and costume and giving them a sense of ownership

for this aspect of the exchange. Participation in Songkran and visits to members of the community also provided the visitors insight into Thai traditions with the hosts serving as cultural experts.

Funding

In an exchange program between agriculture students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and Kasetsart University in Thailand, Robbins and Orr (2004) found great success in increasing both groups of students' understanding and appreciation of each country's culture with great benefits emerging from the regular social engagement between them. Their program was structured such that 10-12 students from KU spent the month of May at UTK while 10-12 UTK students spent June at KU, allowing for many of the students to actually have a two-month intercultural experience.

As Knight notes, the key question around internationalization is "for whom…those who can afford to travel, or those who speak English, or those who can afford foreign tuition fees?" (2009, p. 10). With the economic disparities between the UK and Thailand, funding of these bilateral agreements must be considered. There is little dispute that Western institutions have increasingly targeted Asian institutions with a view to recruiting international students to full degree programs (Stromquist, 2007; Neale, Spark, & Carter, 2018). We contend that these practices bring with them concerns of an ethical nature, another instance of the academic colonization refrain. Coupled with recent HESA (2019) numbers showing an overall decline, though slight, in non-EU enrollment in the UK, this is an unreliable funding source for the future, particularly in the current uncertainty surrounding the impact of Brexit, and more recently the Covid-19 outbreak.

Specific to exchange, while programs such as the UTK-Kasetsart exchange (Robbins & Orr, 2004) received heavy external corporate financial support, this sort of model is much less common outside of the United States. In fact, an aversion to movement in this direction has been expressed for more than a decade, with fear about what reliance on external sources will mean for research integrity and ingenuity (Stromquist, 2007). What this may mean for exchanges such as the case presented here, that focus on programs with less clear ties to industry is unclear and there is the risk that only international programs that can be easily monetized will be funded. Even in the successful UTK Kasetsart exchange some faculty members were responsible for paying for their own airfare for the program; few would agree this is a sustainable model.

Conclusion

There exists a notable lack of research on the experiences of study abroad or exchange students in Thailand (Rhein, 2018). This case study seeks to highlight the many positive products of the prevalent exchange models in internationalization programs, while also taking an honest appraisal of some of the existing challenges within them. Rattana (2015) warns, "Such paradox and contradiction between the over embracement of modernity and persistent rhetoric of traditionalism continues to characterize and challenge the development of Thailand's higher education sector" (p. 91). As a developing nation, and one that has only in the past few decades been able to focus on fostering an internationally competitive higher education system, Thailand does not have the resources—human or financial—or experience necessary to consistently foster an internationalization program that prioritizes their cultural values without the support of more dominant systems, such as that of the UK. These more powerful universities then have the responsibility of practicing mindfully when developing and enacting their exchange agreements.

We make three main recommendations for consideration in these actions:

1. Regularly reassess MOUs, ensuring they remain relevant to the goals of each partner, adjusting them as necessary and not keeping them just to have them;

2. In multilingual partnerships, ensure there is a place-oriented rationale for the program, meaning it is not developed solely because it is a non-traditional location, but because there is a meaningful connection and that the language of instruction is chosen intentionally with curricula built with this in mind; and

3. Establish expectations for funding, ensuring they are contextually appropriate to both institutions' enrollment and create an environment where each party can benefit, according to their stated program, university, or national educational goals.

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