

INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF STUDYING IN THAILAND.

Pornpat Hengudomsub*¹, Michael Pfeil², and Rarcharneeporn Subgranon¹

¹*Faculty of Nursing, Burapha University, Chon Buri 20131, Thailand.*

²*School of Nursing Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of East Anglia, UK.*

ABSTRACT

Studying at a university outside of their own country does not only represent a great opportunity to Asian students, but also a big challenge in terms of cultural adjustment, different teaching and learning styles as well as communication styles. Twelve Asian graduate students interviewed each other about their experiences as international students at one particular Thai university as part of a teaching exercise into research methods. The results revealed that these international students found Thailand to be a good place to study: different enough to challenge their thinking and existing knowledge, but also similar enough to avoid cultural alienation and resentment. The co-operation within a multinational student group as well as the acquisition of English language skills were seen as the most important aspects of learning. These were closely followed by the exposure to a different style of teaching and learning, which focused on the student rather than the teacher. By combining Asian and Western values, Thai universities were able to enhance their international students' knowledge and confidence, without risking the alienation resulting from the culture clash that some Asian students experience at Western universities.

Keywords: Graduate study, international students, Thailand.

* Corresponding author: E-mail address: pornpath@buu.ac.th

INTRODUCTION

The trend in pursuing advanced study among international students in the universities located in member countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations [ASEAN] community is a comparatively new but rapidly growing phenomenon. Little has been written about international graduate students studying at Asian universities. But an extensive body of literature considers the experiences and achievements of Asian international students at Western universities, where they are confronted with great difficulties to themselves and where they often represent a challenge for their Western supervisors. Egege and Kutieleh (2004) outline how most publications dwell on the supposed shortcomings of these students, who frequently describe them as passive, non-critical and learning by rote. Their teachers also lament that Asian students do not 'engage in deep learning'. These judgments arise from a clash of the teachers' Western style critical-thinking approach to learning with traditional Asian, often Confucian-based, learning systems that emphasize a different role of the teacher and student (Watkins, 2000). That 'difference' does not mean 'worse' was asserted by Stevenson and Lee (1996). They discuss the 'paradox of the Chinese learner', who is overwhelmingly a rote learner and should therefore perform badly in the academic arena, but 'tends to outperform' (p.165) western students in international comparisons of educational progress at Western universities.

Instead factors impacting on the academic performance of international students can be considered based on the conceptual framework of Lebcir et al. (2008). These encompass three factors. The first relates to the teaching style, based on the more prominent role of the teacher in Asian culture international students rely more heavily on the lecturer's ability to explain the subject matter to them. Secondly, the students' English language and communication skills are of great importance. This includes the ability to express themselves in English, both in spoken and written form as well as to understand fully the textbooks and research-based advanced texts required by the course of study. Beyond the issue of understanding and making themselves

understood, problems arising from a lack of advanced English language skills have been described as causing considerable psychological distress in students, thus reducing their ability to cope even further (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004). Finally, the modes of assessment will have a major impact on Asian international students' success. These students normally achieve good results in examinations, but often struggle with qualitative questions. These demand a higher level of English language skills as well as critical thinking, both of which require good student preparation. Universities in Thailand, while still sending promising academics to learn and gain their doctoral qualifications at Western universities, have a foot in both camps. Students from other Southeast-Asian countries are increasingly enrolled with Thai universities for their Masters and doctoral degrees. Given that studying successfully in another cultural paradigm is exceptionally difficult (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004), this more recent development of establishing academic hubs situated in Asia, where students from surrounding countries follow international programs of study, suggests great potential for Asian international students.

This paper reports the views of international students originating from Vietnam, Bhutan and China on how their learning for a graduate degree at a Thai university is influenced by their situation and by their learning environment.

METHODOLOGY

The data reported in this paper were collected as part of a small-group teaching exercise with 15 Asian international students at Burapha University (BUU), explaining the use of qualitative data collection methods as part of the research process. The students decided when they faced with a research question that this question should be explored with the use of qualitative, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. They agreed as a group on the interview topics that should be covered, organized the interview schedule and eventually carried out the interviews, interviewing each other. Only the interviewer was aware of the interviewee's identity. Data were collected in the form of hand-written notes, which

were corroborated by the interviewee.

Overall 12 interviews were carried out. The data were analyzed by one of the authors using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This occurred deductively (according to the issues selected by the participating students as being of importance) as well as inductively. Once an analysis was completed, the results were peer-debriefed by the remaining authors. Finally, the results were member-checked by the participating students (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The quotations used within the text were left as much as possible in their original form in order to preserve the truth-value of the data.

Permission for publishing the study results was obtained from these participating students. In order to maintain anonymity, each student was assigned a number. These were used to attribute each quotation to an individual student.

RESULTS

The data presented in this paper was coded into three interrelated themes. These were 'living and studying in a different country', 'a different learning experience' and 'making improvements to the learning of international students'.

Theme 1: Living and studying in a different country

Despite many similarities in the way people across Southeast Asia live, many students emphasized the differences in food, climate and language as a matter of temporary difficulties.

"It is different than living at home at the beginning and felt homely with passage of time. This is because, firstly the environment was different from my home country, the way people do, the way they eat, the language they talk, etc., people are different in their culture, doings and living." [5]

However, the first confusion did quickly abate and adaptation set in within the first month, resulting in the students feeling comfortable. However, brief this adaptation period lasted, it did, for

a while, make study more difficult.

"I got some stress in the first semester so it affected my study negatively. However, the climate is as same as my country (a little bit hotter). I can adapt with the life in Thailand now. I have Thai friends and focus on my study, I feel very interesting to study now." [7]

"[At first] the new learning environment made me feel not being relaxed or very tired. Therefore, I didn't learn good." [3]

It was noticeable that no student did report problems of living with Thais, whether inside or outside the university. Any cultural differences reported did not stretch beyond the areas of food, climate and language. Instead similarities as well as the warm and welcoming nature of the Thai people were emphasized.

"The people are little different but not very significant because Asian culture is the same." [10]

"I love Thai people. Although sometimes they seem to be fairly quiet and reserved, they are very kind, warm and sincere." [9]

"The people are generally gentle, kind and helpful. This type of environment is favorable for my study." [12]

Studying abroad entailed for the students the necessity of living separated from their children and families. This separation was painful, but it was accepted in favor of the 'wonderful opportunity for studying in Thailand' brought to the students.

Two main advantages were emphasized throughout. All students stressed that learning in a comparatively small group of students from a variety of countries brought them a variety of tangible benefits.

"Studying with other international student is a great opportunity to learn and know about different country, culture and people. It also helps to develop friendship networks

between individual, people and country. Yes, it greatly influences learning environment through cooperation, exchange of ideas, sharing experiences and working in a team, etc.” [5]

“I love to study in an international environment with students coming from various countries. I have great friends. They assist me in studying, they are great counselor when I am confronted with problem. We share living experience, culture. I become open-minded and I have learnt much from them. These good relationships support me much emotionally and physically.” [9]

Equally important to studying in a mixed nationality group was the use of English as the exclusive teaching language of the course. This created many difficulties and presented major problems to many students who often suffered from severe limitations in their English language skills.

“Yes, I like it. We do not understand English very well but we ask the teachers to explain more times. Learning in English is very helpful as it helps us to gain confident in talking and communicating with other people.” [1]

However, great efforts were made by students and teaching staff to overcome these problems and as a result the students’ ability to speak English improved.

“I like teaching being done in English so much, it now seems my mother language.” [10]

“In the first semester, I cannot understand very well, then I ask and understand more. So, I jumped the barrier.” [11]

This was helped by the good overall standard of teaching English at Burapha University.

“I would say English is not an easy language but then the instruction in English here is not bad as well.” [5]

Overall the students praised the teachers’ English language skills. However, all of the teaching

staff spoke English as a second language, and therefore their English was not always perfect either. Nevertheless, it was seen as good and important that the course was taught in English, because English was considered an important international language and is used as a working language within the ASEAN community. Furthermore, literature, knowledge, information, and career opportunities, were all seen as open ones to those speaking English.

“I like English because it is the international language. I got many articles in English. If I use English language, I get many knowledge and information. If the students want to become researchers, they should know and improve English. I think the same, you are the Bhutanese and I am Vietnamese, but only in English can we understand each other, know together. I think English nowadays is very good for student not only for researcher.” [4]

There was no student linked any disadvantages to studying in another country, despite the temporary problems that studying abroad and being taught in a foreign language (English) entailed and regardless of having to learn the rudiments of a third language (i.e., Thai). That this did not occur, demonstrated how much the students appreciated the opportunities that studying in Thailand presented them with.

Theme 2: A different learning experience

The approach to teaching and learning experienced by the international students was judged to be a highly prized advantage of studying abroad. It was seen as being very different when compared to what they had experienced at home.

“Teaching style at BUU differs considerably from my country. Students in my country come to school, take note, follow passively and agree on everything teachers say without making any attempt to find their own answers. This cannot lead to best results. I like the teaching method here where I am trained to work independently and actively condition.” [9]

Most importantly, the students felt that they and their learning were at the center of the teaching effort, and that this approach helped to transform them into more active learners.

"The teaching style is different, there we have teacher-centered teaching and here it is focused on the student. I like student-centered teaching with modern techniques like seminars and group work." [1]

"The teaching at BUU is different from teaching back home. We are accustomed with teacher centered learning but in BUU style of teaching is student centered. I think student centered is more worthy as this style make the student an active learner." [12]

"The teaching method in Burapha made me study more and more. It improves my study. It made me more active in study." [8]

"In Burapha University, they applied many methods to teach for students such as seminar, presentation, and self-study. This method helped students be more active in studying." [6]

With less than 20 students per cohort, small group work [seminars] is the dominant approach to teaching, and this did also turn out to be the teaching method preferred by the students.

"They applied many methods to teach for students such as seminar, presentation, and self-study. This method helps students [to be] more active in studying." [7]

"Seminar in nursing research is my preference." [11]

"I like teaching method of lecturers here where I am trained to work independently, actively in an optimal condition." [9]

"I like student-centered teaching with modern techniques like seminars and group work." [1]

The inevitable exchange between students and teaching staff as well as among students was seen as fostering critical thinking and the expressing of

own thoughts and judgments.

"Seminars are the learning style I like best because when we present in the seminar, the participants can critique my presentation and I can answer, and get some advice from my friends, colleagues, and from my advisor. I think seminar is the good methodology for a student in university." [4]

"This system of teaching is very helpful in developing self-learning skills and to be a lifelong learner. The lifelong learning is important because knowledge is like ocean and learning has no limit in our life I believe. So to be a better person one should be a lifelong learner and self-learning." [5]

The approach to teaching is, of course, closely linked to the abilities of teaching staff, which had a central role in the students' minds. They were described as well read, helpful and available when needed, providing feedback on work and pointers towards improving it.

"When I don't understand in studying, I can ask the teachers. And the teachers explain to me any time I need. It helps me to adapt, and good for my learning. Yes, it's very significant to every students who study overseas." [8]

"Yes, definitely teachers are at all times there to help. They give direction, guidance and advice. The amount of support was depended on myself because how much I seek help and ask my doubts, they were there always to lend their helping hand with love and care. There support was really helpful. They are like walking stick to the destination of our studies." [5]

Teachers were seen as helpful and friendly, stretching their support beyond a pure teaching and motivational role towards providing social support. Their efforts had earned them their students' gratefulness and recognition.

“Actually, I would like to say thanks to my teachers so much. They supported me so much not only lecture but also encourage about my spirit very much. When I have some trouble with lecture they are willing to help me.” [6]

As a result of being exposed to all these different ideas, the students grow in confidence, and open-mindedness.

“I have become open-minded and I have learnt much.” [9]

“I understand many things now, I can critique, critical thinking is a good way for students.” [4]

“I feel more confident. I feel happy. And my English is better. It is so good for my study.” [8]

Finally, the teaching environment was well equipped, with classrooms that were seen as fit for purpose. Books and journals as well as computers and Internet access were also readily available.

“The school here is very good the classrooms are well-equipped. The environment is comfortable. It helps us lots in our learning. There are many books, magazines, international journals; I can find them easily when I need. It is very important and supported in my learning a lot.” [2]

“Physical learning environment is good, classrooms have adequate space, they have all the facilities like air-conditioning, furniture, computer with easy access to the Internet. The library has adequate books, we can get the required materials.” [12]

Theme 3: Making improvements to the learning of international students

It is frequently difficult for Asian people to criticize those that are in authority, enjoy great respect or are perceived to be more senior. It was therefore an indicator of achievement for this

university to see that many the students felt they were able to raise issues that in their opinion required improvements. Plenty of recommendations were made. Calls were prominent to increase the positive and successful aspects already present in the course. Most commonly more seminars and activities with other international students, all of which involve opportunities to practice their English, were requested.

“It can be improved by giving more seminars, there should be opportunity to take part in international seminars.” [1]

“There should be the exchange between international students in all schools to improve language learning.” [2]

“More international professors should be invited to give lecture in specific subject.” [9]

“They could organize some activities on Saturdays and Sundays to go somewhere in Thailand, go to hospital, go to community, visit somewhere and have contact with the people in Thailand.” [4]

The second group of comments referred to problems with Internet access and IT problems in peripheral areas (i.e., the student dormitories).

“Some day’s Internet access cannot connect and sometimes I think public computers very slow speed, cannot download. The second, I think, we should have more public printers, mean not only the printer in the copy shop. The printer in the computer center is used by many people and waste time waiting for the turn.” [4]

“We can access login database or science direct and this is very important for study but for some articles, we must pay money for download, so it would be more easy if Burapha University could make an access.” [10]

The third and final group of comments related to the specific pressures international students were

under it, they included help with English language related issues. For example, the distribution of handouts prior to lectures to help students prepare for the session and so increase their understanding.

"In addition, if the class require document, lecturer should give them before go to the class to make them have more time to read it first and understand about the content that lecture will teach." [6]

"Some teachers don't give the handout before the class. The study can be good if the teachers give the hand out first." [8]

"Some students who will present need to send the lessons by email or the handout for classmates before presentation and need to discuss together before." [8]

DISCUSSION

The interviews underlying this paper were carried out by novice interviewers and were documented as hand-written notes rather than audio taped and transcribed verbatim. This resulted inevitably in some technical shortcomings of the data collection. Nevertheless, the results do outline the students' views on their desired and actual learning environment and will allow the university to make improvements to the course curriculum.

International students face problems of cultural adjustment wherever they study. However, based on our data it appears that the adjustment period is considerably shorter and less severely threatening when the students study in a country with some cultural similarities. This means that especially Southeast Asian international students find studying in Thailand less daunting than at an American, European or Australian university, where they face great difficulties for themselves and where they are separated from their Western supervisors by a major cultural gap (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004).

The role of the teacher at this Thai university resembles much closer the traditional, closely engaged and therefore different role of the teacher in Asian culture (Watkins, 2000). However, the students also reported being challenged to demonstrate the

highly prized independent thinking and working that is often seen as the outcome of studying at Western university. When combined, this means that the students can spend less time on full cultural adjustment, and more on being successful in their learning. The question does, however, arise whether studying in Thailand can lead to the same personal and intellectual gains for the students as studying at a Western university.

Lebcir et al.'s (2008) conceptual framework lists the teaching style as the first factor to impact on the academic performance of international students. By teaching the students in small groups, Burapha University has maintained the prominent role of the teacher in Asian culture and the international students do rely on this increased input. However, maintaining a close learning relationship does not mean to sacrifice teacher-independent learning. Seminars which students discuss each other's work and achievements are a central and highly valued aspect of the course. Similarly, many students mentioned self-learning as an important part of their studies. The students are encouraged to think more independently, but in a gentler and more culturally compliant way. They can focus more on learning and progressing and less on trying to understand their teacher's behavior.

Lebcir et al.'s (2008) second factor concerns the students' English language and communication skills. The importance of these skills and the wider problems they can cause students, such as increased stress and slower learning, have been demonstrated in this study data. Despite of the considerable difficulties that being taught in another language represented to the students, no negative comments were made about the use of this language as the teaching language for all subjects. Instead it is asserted strongly to be a positive factor and an important contributor to the course's success. That the students' success could well be due to the continuous efforts of their teachers, who learned English as a second language as well and have a good understanding of the student's situation.

Finally, student assessment is given by Lebcir et al. (2008) as the third and final significant factor

relating to Asian international students' success. However, the assessment process was not considered to be an important enough subject to be considered during the interviews. That the students decided not to include assessment into their enquiries had not happened out of ignorance, but had occurred as an informed choice. Following discussion all participants agreed that the assessment process in their current course resembled the types of assessment used 'at home' closely enough not to present them with any specific concerns beyond the worries inherent in any student assessment. The step up from Bachelors to Masters-type assessments was seen as much more significant than any cultural difference in the assessment.

Asian students in Western countries are found to have disproportionately high levels of academic dissatisfaction, general adaptation problems and financial difficulties (Burns, 1991; Chan, 1999; Wong, 1994). Furthermore, Russel (2005) reports students in the United Kingdom to be seen by their international peers as 'cold, uncaring, unfriendly and unwelcoming' (p73). This is compounded by a lack of integration and as a result Asian international students have been reported to suffer from 'study shock' (Burns, 1991, p 61). Furthermore, it takes international students on average two years to adjust to working in a multicultural environment and increase their language skills sufficiently (Selvarajah, 2006).

This experience of international students in the West contrasts significantly with the Thai approach of small group work and close teacher-student collaboration in a country that is known for its welcoming culture and that is different enough to be challenging but that is also part of an overarching Asian culture. In a world where countries are competing for international students and the income they represent to higher education institutions, student dissatisfaction and delays in achieving study goals can be expected to have a major impact of future student choices, especially when funding governments will take the students' opinions as well as their success rates into account. Thailand is, therefore, in an

advantageous position to develop its international provision further.

This position is expected to improve further with the full implementation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) agreement. Although originally perceived as a trade bloc agreement to support local manufacturing in all ASEAN countries, AFTA will also have a considerable effect on higher education. English will be a major language used for communication among ASEAN countries and with free trade people from ASEAN countries can apply and work in other countries, which are the members of AFTA. This is good news for the Thai universities as well as their international students.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a small snapshot of the issues related to the teaching and learning in relation to international students. Based on the students' opinions it paints a positive picture of current achievements and of the future opportunities Thai universities can present to their international students. Rather than providing a copy of Western education, they keep the strongest and most desirable aspects of Western learning and teach them in a way that combines the strengths of both parts of the world and as a way to enhance teaching and learning for people of ASEAN community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the considerable contribution made by the international students who participated in this study. Great appreciation is given to Professor Somsak Pantuwatana for his support in preparing this manuscript. The thoughtful comments received from the journal's anonymous reviewers are also greatly appreciated.

REFERENCES

- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (3): 77-101.
- Burns, R. B. 1991. Study and stress among first year overseas students in an Australian university. *Higher Education Research and*

Development 1(10): 61-77.

- Chan, S. 1999. The Chinese learner-a question of style. *Education and Training* 41(6): 294-304.
- Egege, S. and Kutieleh, S. 2004. Critical thinking: Teaching foreign notions to foreign students. *International Education Journal* 4 (4): 75-85.
- Lebcir, R. M., Wells, H., and Bond, A. 2008. Factors affecting academic performance of international students in project management courses: A case study from a British post 92 University. *International Journal of Project Management* 26: 268-274.
- Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.
- Russel, M. 2005. Marketing education: A review of service quality perceptions among international students. *International Journal for Contemporary Hospitality* 1(17): 65-77.
- Selvarajah, C. 2006. Cross-cultural study of Asian and European student perception. *Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal* 2(13): 142-155.
- Stevenson, H. W. and Lee, S. Y. 1996. The academic achievement of Chinese students. In M. H. Bond (ed.). *The Handbook of Chinese Psychology*. Oxford University Press, Hong Kong.
- Watkins, D. 2000. Learning and teaching: A cross-cultural perspective. *School Leadership and Management* 20(2): 161-170.
- Wong, J. K. 1994. Are the learning styles of Asian International students culturally or contextually based? *International Educational Journal* 4(4): 154-166.