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Internationalization of higher education in Thailand: Promises and reality

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Article Info

Abstract

For many countries, the mobility of international students is becoming increasingly critical in the global trend of internationalization of higher education and migratory patterns. This paper aims to: (1) review the concept of internationalization of higher education from various perspectives; (2) review the internationalization of higher education in the context of ASEAN; (3) identify the success factors for internationalization from the lessons learned from popular receiving countries; (4) discuss the case of internationalization of higher education in Thailand; and (5) provide recommendations for the same. The paper suggests that even though the number of international students enrolled in Thai institutions increases over time, much more can be done to attract international applicants. From the perspective of Thai institutions, in a competitive environment of international education in the ASEAN context, the Thai government policy and programs need to be improved to attract and retain international students. The key success factors of internationalization in higher education consist of the international environment within the institution, the institution's reputation for quality and cost of education, and the institution's capabilities to service and support international students.

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Introduction

The movement of international students as part of the global internationalization of higher education involves significant migratory behavior. In order to cope with the worldwide demand for a new generation of workers who can function well in international environments and cross-cultural communities, cross-border education has been — and will continue to be – a significant trend. Nevertheless, there are broader concerns about how international study is shaped by forces of globalization (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018). In 2015, international students accounted for 9 percent of the total number of students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, representing 14 percent of all students enrolled in master's degree programs and 24 percent enrolled in doctoral studies (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018).

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Asia has long been the largest source of international student mobility for institutions in OECD countries, which dominant as educational destinations (Brooks & Waters, 2011). In the last ten years, however, there has been substantial growth in the number of students on the move within Asia, particularly in China, Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan (Chan, 2012). As such, the number of countries actively involved in international student recruitment has also increased noticeably. More private education entities are competing with government universities in order to attract international students. The most ambitious programs in private universities have created innovative courses, short-course training, and flexible images to match students' preferences, including roadshow events, generous scholarships, and exchange programs (Marketeer, 2019). For these reasons, it is no wonder that the highest number of international students is found in private universities (Marketeer, 2019; Thansettakij, 2017).

Increased student mobility within Asia may imply enhancing educational development within the region. By increasing the number of international students and staff enrolled or working at an institution, the region can move to a higher rank, nationally and internationally (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014). This movement in ranking contributes to potential competition with other regions, particularly countries in Europe and the Americas. Besides, the receiving countries also benefit in many ways from having international students. International students considerably contribute to the economies of the city and the nation. Research shows that many developed countries benefit from international programs and international students (Olds, 2012). International students also bring a positive social, cultural, and educational perspective to receiving countries (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014). Students from different cultures and nationalities help promote multiculturalism and enrich local students' global perspectives by sharing their experiences. The internationalization of higher education integrates an international dimension into an institution's academic, research, and service systems (Knight, 2008). Making higher education responsive to the globalization of the labor market, economy, and societies is the purpose of internationalizing higher education (Van der Wende, 1997). Thus, internationalization in line with international standards and response to the global environment is fundamental in improving higher education (Qiang, 2003). Therefore, it has become increasingly vital to comprehend internationalization and the success factors that enhance the internationalization of higher education that influence many students' decision to study abroad.

This paper reviewed the internationalization of higher education from the host-country perspective of Thailand to discuss the importance of internationalization of education within the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) context. The paper also briefly reviewed the Thai government's policy and described patterns and trends in terms of number, home country, level of degree, and field of study of international students enrolled in academic institutions in Thailand. The paper identified factors for the successful internationalization of higher education and lessons learned from popular receiving countries based on the literature review. Finally, the obstacles the internationalization of higher education in the case of Thailand were discussed.

Methodology

The concept of internationalizing higher education has three perspectives; the international relations perspective, management perspective, and the perspective of the individual or student. The international relations perspective links the internationalization in higher education with globalization, referring to the trends of cross-national implications on higher education and specific policies and initiatives of countries to manage global trends (Altbach, 2002). There are policies, for example, related to the recruitment of international students, collaboration with other countries' educational systems, and establishment of branch campuses in other countries (Altbach, 2002). The management perspective of internationalizing higher education has been defined as the operational process development of business within the international environment of universities and institutions (Delgado-Márquez, Hurtado-Torres, & Bondar, 2011). The internationalization in higher education can also be considered from an individual or student perspective, such as the interest of the students in programs, decision making to enroll and study, students' international-mindedness, or the resilience of the students in the receiving country (Chan & Dimmock, 2008; Fiṭ & Gologan, 2018; Hayden, Thompson, & Williams, 2003; Jibeen & Khan, 2015). Therefore, the discussion of this paper was based primarily on the management perspective at the university or institution level.

Former research suggested considering three sectors regarding rationales of higher education: government sector, education sector, and private sector (Qiang, 2003). The government sector includes national policies and government units interested in the international dimension of higher education (e.g., ministries of foreign affairs,

culture, economic development, and trade). The education sector refers to the institutions that make up the system (e.g., universities, institutes, polytechnics, colleges). The private sector is a varied group broader than private education providers. This includes businesses, companies, and services supporting international students to study abroad. This paper mainly considered the government sector and the education sector.

The internationalization of higher education considers the quality of an institution and recognizes education qualification at the national and international levels. These include attention to the improvement of institution providers, programs, credits, registration, licensing, and recognition by sending and receiving countries (Jibeen & Khan, 2015). Maintaining and standardizing the quality of academic programs has been one of the challenges of the internationalization of higher education. Although trustworthy national and international qualification organizations work in many countries to certify the quality of programs, it is unknown whether the existing national accreditation and quality warrant system support educational migration (Knight, 2007). Some scholars state that internationalization of higher education is the holistic management of institutions to attract international students by heightening the quality and capacity of learning, teaching, and research (Elkin, Farnsworth, & Templer 2008; Söderqvist, 2002). At the same time, others argue that internationalization is only a process of enhancing the international environment of institutions (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2011).

To illustrate and construct a body of data on the internationalization of higher education in Thailand, and the success factors for internationalization, selected policy documents, articles, newspapers, reports, and research papers were reviewed. The paper first describes the concept of internationalization in higher education. Second, the internationalization of higher education in the ASEAN context is discussed. Third, success factors from popular receiving countries are reviewed and identified. Forth, policies and implementation of internationalization in Thailand are reviewed and discussed. Finally, recommendations are provided for enhancing the internationalization of higher education in Thailand.

The data of international students in Thailand were sourced from the Higher Educational Statistic 2009–2017, conducted by the Office of Higher Education Council (Office of Higher Education Council [OHEC], 2019). Descriptive analysis was used to describe international education in Thailand, including the number, country of origin, and level of education of international students. The paper further identifies the achievement factors based on the policies for international students in Singapore, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Internationalization of Higher Education in the Context of ASEAN

This section illustrates the educational migration at the policy level within the AEC framework, how the regional framework can support educational migration in the country members, and whether Thailand can take advantage of the AEC to become an educational hub of the region. This section provides more understanding of the opportunity for several countries in the region and the position of Thailand to achieve the internationalization improvement on higher education.

As a single entity, the AEC is one of the world's largest economies with a population of more than 630 million people across ten member countries (Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Singapore, and Brunei) (ASEAN, 2019). Within the AEC framework (first implemented at the end of 2015), there is a more unrestricted flow of goods, services (including education), and foreign direct investment. The AEC supports the development of the internationalization of higher education as a priority, and the AEC is expected to create more opportunities for internationalization within the ASEAN region going forward. The AEC framework envisions an effortless flow of skilled labor and cross-border capital. Thus, an increase in the number of international students from other ASEAN countries is foreseen along with the rise of economic activity (Kasikorn Bank, 2012).

Thailand, a middle-income country within the ASEAN community, is located in the heart of Southeast Asia, giving Thailand a strategic advantage in offering business opportunities, including international educational enterprise, through government policies (Yin, Ruangkanjanases, & Chen, 2015). As an affordable study destination, it is advantageous for Thailand to entice international students from ASEAN countries (Yin et al., 2015). Both the reasonable tuition fees and cost of living in Thailand compare favorably to the long-standing international student destinations such as the United States (U.S.), United Kingdom (U.K.), and Australia. Higher education in Thailand is also more affordable than in Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

In addition to placing importance on international education in a competitive regional context, the significance of international higher education for Thailand may also be viewed from a demographic perspective.

As Thailand has become an aging society with the proportion of the population aged 60 years or older currently accounting for 19 percent, and with low fertility of about 1.51, which is below the replacement level (IPSR, 2021), there is a smaller pool of young Thais each year to pursue higher education. Thus, universities in Thailand are increasingly being forced to pursue students from other countries to compensate for the lack of eligible Thai students. However, some students from other countries may see education in Thai institutions as a detriment to future employment (Thansettakij, 2017).

According to data from 2009–2019 (Figure 1), the number of international students in Thailand has increased continuously in the last decade. In 2019, Thailand hosted 25,110 international students from 135 countries, representing an average increase of around 2,000 each year since 2009 (OHEC, 2019). The top ten countries of origin of international students enrolled in Thailand were mainly in Asia (Figure 2). On average, the highest number of international students come from China (6,923), making up 40 percent of the total international student population. In fact, China has become the primary source of international students in Thailand since 2006 (Yin et al., 2015). The upward trend of Chinese students almost doubled within nine years, from 5,611 in 2009 to 11,993 in 2019 (Figure 3).
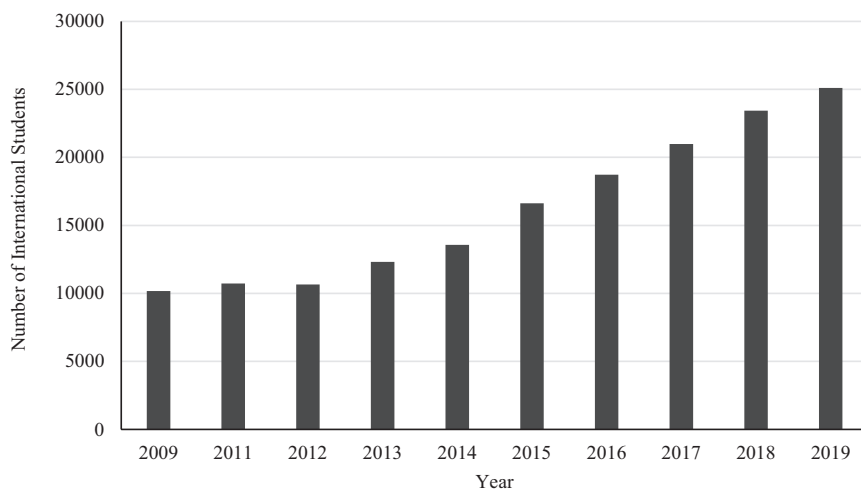

Figure 1 Number of International Students in Thailand, 2009–2019
Note: Calculated from data collected by the OHEC, Thailand (Data in 2010 were excluded, as such was considered an outlier)
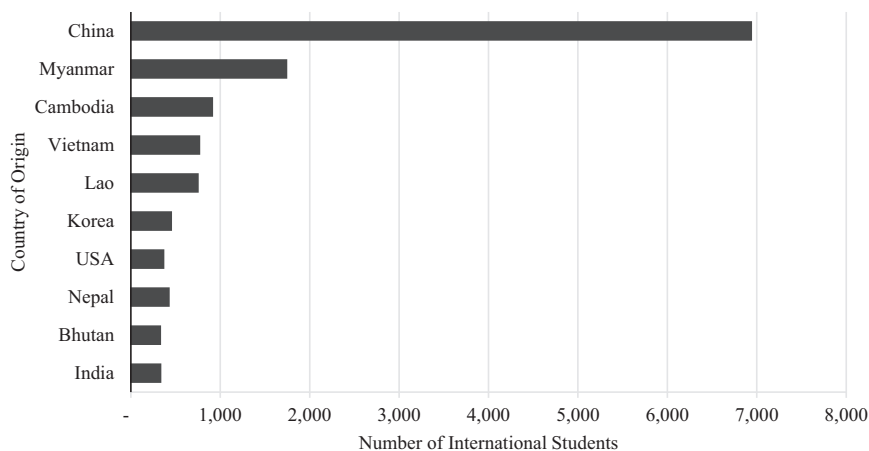

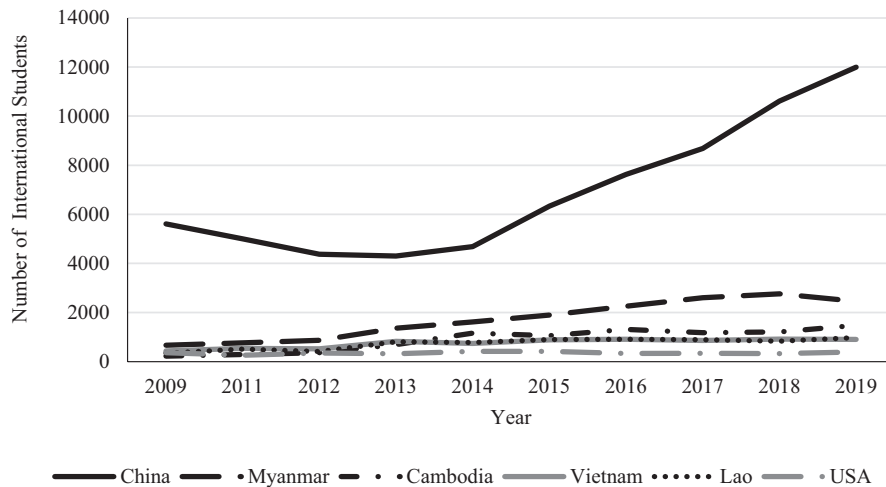**Figure 2** Top–10 Countries of Origin of International Students

Figure 3 International Students in Thailand from China, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR, and the United States, 2009–2019
Note: Calculated from data collected by the OHEC, Thailand. Data in 2010 were excluded, as such was considered an outlier

Over ten years, from 2009 to 2019, undergraduate study accounted for the highest proportion of international students in Thailand, while postgraduate enrollment of non-Thais increased gradually, from 22 percent in 2009 to 31 percent in 2019. However, the trend fluctuated during some years (Figure 4). The most popular field of study was business administration or international business. The second most popular field of study was English language for students from Lao PDR and Myanmar, Buddhism for students from Myanmar, and nursing and public health for Vietnamese students (Thansettakij, 2017).

Thailand is not the only country that yearns to become an educational hub in the region. To position itself as a center of higher education in ASEAN, Thailand needs to compete with the other countries in the region. In addition to long-standing players like the U.S., the U.K., and other European nations, Australia, and New Zealand, countries from Asia such as China, Singapore, Japan, and Malaysia have also emerged as attractive destinations for higher education (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014). For example, Malaysia, one of Thailand's neighbors, has increased the priority of attracting international students to higher education. Its government has offered support and incentives for overseas providers to set up branch campuses in Malaysia (Armstrong & Laksana, 2016).
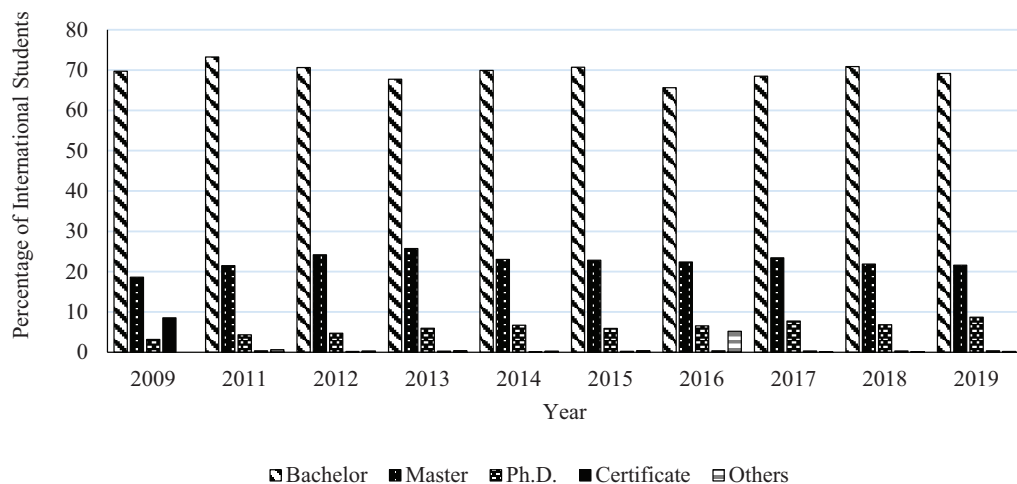

Figure 4 Percentage of International Students in Thailand by Level of Study, 2009–2019
Note: Calculated from data collected by the OHEC, Thailand. Data in 2010 were excluded, as such was considered an outlier

To take advantage of the AEC for international education, some strategies for Thailand have been proposed and implemented, including modifying the relevant immigration laws to facilitate entry and residence of international students from neighboring ASEAN countries, increasing distance-learning programs, opening up campuses in other countries, and building strategic alliances with foreign institutions to compete in ASEAN's single market (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014).

Success Factors for Internalization of Higher Education: Lessons from Popular Receiving Countries

Attracting international students is becoming increasingly competitive (Yin et al., 2015). The achievement factors of internationalization in higher education have also become increasingly essential to influence many students' decisions to study abroad. Scholars indicated that internationalization in higher education could involve with the holistic management of institutions (Elkin et al., 2008; Söderqvist, 2002) and processes of enhancing the international environment of institutions (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2011). This section discusses the factors for improving the achievement of internationalization in higher education, focusing on the government level (host country policies) and educational level (institution management).

At the government level, English-speaking countries, though they have more opportunities than their non-English-language counterparts, strategize ways to attract international students. Canada, for example, has introduced intensely competitive immigration policies in the sphere of higher education. The number of international students in Canada increased to more than 350,000 (8% of the total enrollment) in the 2015–2016 academic year due to Canada's policy on Citizenship and Immigration (Canadian Citizenship and Immigration Resource Center [CCIRC], 2017). That policy allows Canadian immigration to be more flexible in admitting international students to study, work, and become permanent residents (Gopal, 2014). For instance, international students can work a maximum of 20 hours per week even without a work permit, both on- and off-campus. They can also apply for a Post-Graduation Work Permit, a three-year open permit to work in any industry. Additionally, international graduate students (master's degree or doctoral program) can apply to the Provincial Nomination Program for permanent residence (Gopal, 2014).

Contrasting Canada's multiple ways to work and apply for permanent residence, international students in the United States holding F–1 student visas can only obtain temporary employment by applying for Optional Practical Training. The work is restricted to the student's major field of study (Gopal, 2014). International study in the U.S. became even more restricted after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the Trump administration's anti-immigration policy (Canadian Citizenship and Immigration Resource Center [CCIRC], 2017). New enrollment of international students in the U.S. declined by more than 10% between the 2015–2016 and 2018–2019 academic years (Anderson, 2019). Furthermore, in the 2017–2018 academic year, many U.S. institutions of higher learning were effectively closed to applicants from seven Muslim-majority countries after the government's blanket ban on immigration from those nations (Canadian Citizenship and Immigration Resource Center [CCIRC], 2017). Under these regulations, international students in the U.S. have to follow a lengthy set of rules, including permission only to work part-time or on-campus. It is even more challenging to qualify for full-time employment in the U.S. after graduation (Anderson, 2019; Federis, 2019). There is also currently a proposal to limit the number of years an international student can stay in the U.S., which is a radical change from a current policy where international students are often permitted to remain as long as they follow all the rules and continue their studies full-time (Federis, 2019).

In the United Kingdom, recent government policies have imposed tighter international student visa restrictions, especially for students outside the European Union. The current policies affect international students' ability to study and work in the U.K. in the following ways: (1) the relative cost of student visas along with time-consuming visa processing; (2) a two-tier system of providers whereby institutions with visa refusal rates deemed too high are placed in a second-tier with greater limitations on quotas of international students; (3) a high level of surveillance for non-E.U. international students during study, including monthly reporting, which institutions must police under threat of losing their Tier 1 status, thereby generating a strong sense that the students are not welcome or trusted; (4) English-language skill requirements and an increase in the amount of credibility-check interviews; and (5) Work visas are complicated to obtain after graduation (Gopal, 2014; Redden, 2018). However, a new strategy to boost international student recruitment was recently announced by the current prime minister of the U.K. From 2021, international students who enroll in undergraduate, postgraduate, or Ph.D. courses in the U.K. will be able to stay for two years after they graduate with a two-year post-study work visa (Grierson, 2019). By contrast, currently, graduates who complete a bachelor's or master's degree in the U.K. are allowed to work for only four months after graduation (Turner, 2019).

Australia is another country with increased international student enrollment, especially students from China, who account for more than 30 percent of Australia's international students (Redden, 2018). The factor contributing to Australia's success in recruiting international students is the availability of two- to four-year postgraduate work visas (Redden, 2018). A declining postgraduate market and a cap on funding for the public universities in Australia are causing many universities to attempt to be more attractive to international students, especially those students who can pay full tuition. Although Australia's universities are not yet a global brand on the scale of the U.S. or U.K., Australia is seen as having a good quality of education, and admission into its universities is relatively easy (Redden, 2018).

Singapore also has an excellent educational system, and that has been a critical driver for its economic development. Singapore has clear policies to attract the brightest international students by providing scholarships, tuition grants, and job opportunities after graduation (Department of International Trade Promotion [DITP], 2014; Lim, 2019). Singapore also attracts international students based on its highly-ranked universities, diverse program offerings, and government funding. Those qualities outweigh other factors, such as relatively higher tuition and cost of living, and Singapore's formidable visa process (Basillote, Gradus, Lamb, Sharoni, & Thng, 2016).

At the institutional level, the institution's or university's management and services are considered. A study of two universities, Assumption University (ABAC) in Thailand and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in Malaysia, indicated common factors that enhanced the achievement of internationalization in higher education (Armstrong & Laksana, 2016). Those factors include the vision and mission of the university, top management commitment, the awareness and understanding of internationalization of the faculty and staff, and creating an international environment. For Thailand, the three factors enhancing the internationalization of their academic programs are summarized as follows:

1. The vision and mission of the university to establish an international academic entity and internationalized curriculum are important since students tend to evaluate the recognition of the university and its programs before considering other factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Research in Thailand highlighted that joint university programs and academic cooperation are essential for international students to consider enrollment (Yin et al., 2015). The quality of the student recruitment, the institution's recruitment office, fees, and degree monitored by the host institution, and having joint programs and academic cooperation are also essential.

Data indicated that 20 percent of Chinese students came to Thailand through collaborative programs (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014).

2. Quality of education and cost and service capabilities of the university are also important. International students are more influenced by a university's reputation for quality education, having high-quality faculty, and readiness to recognize a student's requirements (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). A study on factors influencing international students in Thailand also mentioned that the facilities and resources are significantly related to international students' destination choice (Yimpensook, 2014). In addition, the university's online information also plays another critical role in the recruitment processes. Most students explore the university's information through the website, so a quick response or reply to the online registration system satisfies them (Yin et al., 2015). The educational cost is another significant factor for students in deciding on a program. Yimpensook (2014) stated that international students in Thailand perceived a higher overall quality of Thailand's universities and realized the study and living costs are relatively low.

3. International recognition and proficiency in foreign languages as a part of scholarly communication in the university is essential. Communication capacity among professors, staff, and local students in foreign languages demonstrates international recognition and supports international students living on campus (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). This foreign language capacity answers another purpose of students studying abroad to improve their language skills (Yimpensook, 2014). Moreover, previous research in Thailand indicated that the internationalization of an academic institution, together with Thailand's reputation for having a less constrained sociocultural, political, and religious lifestyle, may be attractive to international students (Santiwatra, n.d.; Wattanasiri, 2010).

In conclusion, the factors enhancing internationalization in higher education identified in this paper consist of government level and educational level –primarily focused on destination context. The government-level includes educational policy, immigration policy, visa processes, and consideration of students› employment opportunities after graduation. The educational level is mainly related to image. Strategic management of host institutions and universities consists of the vision and mission of the university to establish the international academic entity and internationalized curriculum, quality of education, cost and service delivery capabilities of the university, and international recognition and proficiency in foreign languages as a part of scholarly communication in the university.

Table 1 Summary of Factors Related to Internationalization in Higher Education

Government Level	Institutional Level
- Education and immigration policy of destination country	- Vision and mission of the university to establish an international academic entity and internationalized curriculum
- Visa process and cost of living	- Quality of education and cost and service capabilities of the university
- Job opportunity after graduation	- International recognition and proficiency in foreign languages as a part of academic communication in the university

The Case of Thailand

This section discusses government strategies to accommodate international education in Thailand, including government policies, ministry action plans, and institution strategic plans and how these programs were implemented. For host countries, policies concerning the management of international education can be implemented on two complementary grounds. On the one hand, a policy can focus on the attraction of international students, and on the other hand, a policy can attempt to influence the retention of students once they have graduated (Beine, Noël, & Ragot, 2014).

In order to compete with the other ASEAN countries, Thailand has aimed at developing quality higher education that meets international standards (Armstrong & Laksana, 2016). In 2009, under the Democrat Party (2008–2011), the Thai government set the policy to promote the country to become the center of higher education in Southeast Asia by 2017. The following year, in 2010, the Ministry of Education put forth its 'Asian Educational Action Plan' to enhance domestic educational standards to attract students and experts within the region (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2010). These policies were consolidated into the overarching goal of Thailand to become the premier destination for education, training, and international academic conferences and seminars in Southeast Asia. Around that time, the government also started providing more scholarships to study in Thailand for international students (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014; Thansettakij, 2017).

However, under the succeeding administration, the Pheu Thai government (2011–2014) reduced the priority of the 'regional education hub' strategy in order to focus more on domestic issues. Meanwhile, the current policy on educational development under Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-o-cha (2014–present) does not explicitly mention Thailand as an academic hub for Asia. Still, the current administration has promoted the policy to attract foreign experts and researchers to help the country accelerate in technological and innovative development (MOE, 2019).

Another platform to attract international students to Thailand is through the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) initiative. The government's vision for the EEC is to enhance Thailand's competitiveness by providing incentives to increase investment in target industries. The EEC supports partnerships with international institutions to produce skilled labor in order to augment ten target industries in the EEC zone (EEC, 2017).

The OHEC also emphasizes these types of international collaborations in its plan for 2015–2018 (OHEC, 2017) and the 15–Year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand (2008–2022) to improve Thai educational standards in the context of a multi-cultural society and increased cross-border mobility (OHEC, 2008). Regarding cross-border education, the OHEC has followed the General Agreement on Trade in Services under the Word Trade Organization to support: (1) Cross-border delivery (distance learning and e-learning programs); (2) Consumption abroad (exchange students and dual programs); (3) Commercial presence (promote the establishment of branches of international institutions in Thailand); and (4) Presence of natural persons (exchange professional education programs).

In addition, the 15-Year Long Range Plan on Higher Education of Thailand (2008–2022) addresses the importance of bilateral agreements among educational institutions, particularly in Asian countries (e.g., China and India) (OHEC, 2008). China and India are countries with the largest populations and are emerging global economic leaders in the 21st century. Therefore, the OHEC collaborated with China and India, including learning languages, joint programs, and the exchange of students, teachers, and researchers (OHEC, 2008).

As subsequent administrations have not thoroughly carried out the initiatives from previous governments, the policies and goals mentioned above are still in various stages of implementation, and the academic institutions mainly implement internationalization. For example, Moussa and Somjai (2015) composed the approaches of three leading Thai universities (Chulalongkorn University, Mahidol University, and King Mongkut University of Technology Thonburi) used to develop internationalization in their institution. These include the processes of: (1) notifying all units on internationalization activities;

(2) recruiting international students; (3) managing international admissions in cooperation with admissions staff; (4) managing all services for international students; (5) raising funds and administering the budget; (6) creating partnerships with other academic units; (7) generating and implementing official agreements; (8) developing international research grant applications; (9) providing necessary reporting protocols for international activities; (10) monitoring progress relative to the benchmarks that took place; and (11) submitting an annual report to the university senate on progress comparative with benchmarks.

As the government has played a passive role, academic institutions struggle with their strategic plans to attract international students. Though the cost of managing a quality international program is relatively high, placing substantial demands on institutional support services, the institutes put effort into controlling the tuition fee to attract international students (Ward, 2001). The international programs in Thailand are usually three, or sometimes five or six times higher than domestic programs. If the government did not subsidize these international programs, the cost of internationalization of higher education in Thailand would soon become a burden for academic institutions.

Developing an international curriculum is also a challenge for the institutions. This issue has been raised that international programs must be accredited by the Ministry of Education and the Office of National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014). An intrinsic qualitative case study at Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) in northern Thailand looked at the challenges with the internationalization of higher education institutions in the AEC. The study stated that RMUTL tried to establish an international program by cooperation with an international university. However, they needed more support from the Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC) for credit evaluation and approval (Moussa & Somjai, 2015).

Lacking a coherent policy exacerbates a situation in which some academic institutions in Thailand have not yet been approved by the students' countries of origin, which degrades the reputation of higher education in Thailand. Thus, in preparation for the inevitable expansion of international education, Thailand's academic institutions have continuously broadened their domestic and global network (Chang, 2004). However, eventually, without government support, an individual institution's plan tends not to be sustainable (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014).

Conclusions and Recommendation

The increase in educational migration has generated implications for educational policies, academic systems, and institutions. Thailand, similar to other countries around the world, is keen to develop its international education platform. Although the number of international students enrolled in Thai institutions has increased over time, much more can be done to entice applicants from other countries. Thailand's policy on international education supports internationalization in higher education, including the policy on promoting Thailand to become the regional education hub of higher education in Southeast Asia, the policy on supporting institutions with international partnerships for joint programs or exchange students, and strategic plans on standard educational improvement in the context of internationalization or multi-cultural society.

At the national level, Thailand should conform and implement relationships between government policies and academic institutions to support the international system, particularly accreditation between origin country and destination country. Fiscal support from the Thai government to create a global environment and improve the academic quality of institutional education is also needed. At the university or institution level, the institutions should vigorously promote their vision through administrators and staff to establish a high standard program and support international student services. Although internationalized recognition is essential, only having an English program is no longer enough to attract the enrolment of international students. Internationalization in higher education should also link between local, regional, and international level sectors. Besides, studying and working together among Thai and international students can contribute to Thai society's knowledge and innovation exchange.

As discussed above, this paper realizes that the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread to Thailand around the end of 2019, may have changed the internationalization of Thailand's higher education. The international students might decide to refrain from and return to study in their home country. Without appropriate and quick responses, the institution and destination county will lose the financial benefit of international students. The decline of international students will affect income in the country and likewise affect the research capacity of international students. Many developed counties face this problem due to their inability to control the pandemic, and uncertainty still looms large.

According to the Global Health Security Index (GHS), Thailand is ranked as the best in Asia and sixth in the world for pandemic prevention and combatting COVID-19 (Singh, 2020). Thailand should take the opportunity by positioning itself as a trusted destination for international education. However, it is also possible that people prefer to study abroad without cross-border movement. This is a challenge for higher education institutions worldwide to adjust, including Thailand, such as innovating online programs and virtual education platforms. This might also be an opportunity to lower the cost of education and enable international programs to be more accessible to international students worldwide. The policy and action plan has to actively play a supporting role in order to attract and maintain international students amidst the competitive global trend of the virtual learning platform.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

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