

**การวิเคราะห์วรรณกรรมเชิงวิพากษ์ด้านความเป็นนานาชาติของ  
การอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทย: กรอบการศึกษาทางเลือก  
A Critical Analysis of the Literature on the Internationalisation  
of Thai Higher Education: A Call for a Counter-Narrative**

Received 6 December 2023

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Revised 21 February 2024

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Accepted 28 February 2024

**บทคัดย่อ**

บทความชิ้นนี้มุ่งศึกษาวรรณกรรมที่เกี่ยวข้องกับความเป็นนานาชาติของการอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทย จากการวิเคราะห์วรรณกรรมจำนวน 38 ชิ้น ด้านความเป็นนานาชาติของการอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทย ผู้วิจัยได้สำรวจขอบเขตวรรณกรรมเพื่อให้ทราบว่างานด้านนี้ถูกตีกรอบอย่างไร และกรอบด้านเสรีนิยมใหม่ซึ่งขับเคลื่อนความเป็นนานาชาติของการอุดมศึกษาไทยสามารถอธิบายปฏิบัติการและความเป็นจริงในระดับสถาบันได้มากน้อยเพียงใด ผู้วิจัยได้พัฒนานิยามและแนวคิดด้านความเป็นนานาชาติของการอุดมศึกษาของ Williams et al. (2021) เพื่อสร้างแนวทางการศึกษาทางเลือกให้แก่การศึกษาด้านความเป็นนานาชาติของการอุดมศึกษา ซึ่งเป็นปรากฏการณ์ที่เกิดขึ้นจากตัวแสดงและสถาบันในระดับท้องถิ่น กล่าวโดยสรุป แนวทางการศึกษาทางเลือกดังกล่าวจะแสดงให้เห็นถึงประสบการณ์จริงจากบรรดาผู้บริหารหน่วยงานและผู้ปฏิบัติการด้านการอุดมศึกษาของไทย นอกจากนี้บทความชิ้นนี้ยังให้กรอบการศึกษาที่แตกต่างจากกรอบการศึกษาแบบเสรีนิยมใหม่ซึ่งมีอิทธิพลเป็นอย่างมากต่อวรรณกรรมทั่วโลก

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### **Abstract**

This article examines literature related to the internationalisation of higher education (IHE) in Thailand. Through analysis of 38 publications on IHE in Thailand, the scope of literature is explored in order to determine how it frames the imperatives and narratives of IHE development, and to what extent neoliberal interpretations as drivers of Thai IHE explain practices and realities at the institutional level. The author puts forward the contextually and socially driven definition and concept of IHE by Williams et al. (2021) to both frame and recommend an alternative approach to the study of IHE as a phenomenon experienced and largely created by local institutions and actors. The article concludes that such an approach would provide a distinctive voice to the real and lived experiences of leaders and practitioners in higher education institutions in Thailand, and a counter-narrative to the dominant neoliberal assumptions of the global literature.

*Keywords:* Internationalisation of higher education, Neoliberalism, Social construction

### **Introduction**

The role of the university has dramatically transformed in recent decades. Driven by a largely uncontested neoliberal economic global order, the changes we have witnessed in the higher education (HE) sector across the world have been nothing short of astonishing. Emanating from the power centres of North America and Europe, the global drive towards economic competition has permeated the HE sector. Based on neoliberal values of the

free market, privatisation, self-interest and efficiency, the university sector worldwide has embraced the new world order and radically adapted its philosophy, approach, structure, mission, and values accordingly.

Globalisation in all its complex facets has played a major role in this transformation and has become the vehicle for the neoliberal drive towards economic gain, as well as the shaping of social relations. The purpose of education has come to mirror the powerful ambitions of the neoliberal philosophy and the shift towards a focus on creating human capital. Rizvi (2017) refers to this as the “neoliberal imaginary”, which views education “in human capital terms while supporting individual self-interests in an increasingly competitive society”. Universities have adapted their entire programmes and *raison-d’être* to match the profound changes brought about by globalisation economically, politically and culturally.

Globalisation and the internationalisation of the HE sector has challenged the traditional view of higher education as a “public good’ symbolic of “social responsibility”. The privatisation of higher education has led to business practises dominating the HE sector, with income generation the catalyst for the international strategies of universities. Student mobility represents a substantial portion of the national GDP of many countries and is therefore a prime example of the privatised income-focussed aspect of the sector.

1999 saw reforms in Thailand that continue to resonate across the education system, with the launch of the neoliberal education policies of the first National Education Act (NEA). Thailand’s First Long-range Plan for Higher Education Development (1999-2004) consolidated the role of HE in economic terms and as

a key channel through which Thailand could attain leading industrialised nation status in Southeast Asia. With economic competitiveness as a strong objective, wide-ranging reforms in education from decentralisation, government accountability and quality assurance to a more student-centred education and performance-driven, higher quality teachers more akin to corporate employees, have been implemented over the last two decades (Phuaphansawat, 2017), reflecting the determined introduction of market approaches and mechanisms within the education system.

Heavily influenced by the neoliberal market-focussed paradigm, Thailand has concentrated its efforts on internationalising its HE system since the early 1990s. One striking outcome of IHE in Thailand has been the booming numbers of International Programmes (IPs). These programmes, initially created to respond to the economic demands for English-speaking graduates possessing international knowledge and skills (Lao, 2015), face ongoing criticism of elitism. McBride (2012) points out that policymakers in Thailand seem more interested in quantity than quality and valid questions remain over how the state is monitoring and regulating such programmes. However, with increased autonomy and institutional power, universities are under pressure to expand their education offer with new, market-oriented programmes in order to generate more income, and IPs are expected to deliver.

Much of the literature on IHE in Thailand focusses on such market-oriented approaches and remains accepting of the neoliberal narrative which sees IHE as serving predominantly the economic needs of the market. Student mobility and concerns around ‘lifting’ the quality of Thai Higher Education to meet international standards in order for Thailand to maintain its

economic competitiveness dominate the research. However, these reflections do not seek to explain or justify what is happening at the ground level and at the institutions themselves and within the processes of IHE creation implemented by its key actors. While the literature responds to the seismic changes which are taking place at higher institutions in Thailand, the changes it explores are the reactive changes to an established neoliberal IHE agenda. Only a minority of academics works attempt to truly unearth how IHE is created, adapted and owned at the local, institutional level.

### **Research Objective**

Through the study of existing literature on Thai IHE, this research aims to respond to the following research questions:

1. How does the literature frame the imperatives and narratives of IHE development in Thailand?
2. To what extent can neoliberal interpretations as drivers of Thai IHE explain practices and realities at the institutional level?
3. Is there a need, and if so why, for a counter-narrative that can explain IHE as experienced by local institutions and actors?

This study probes the IHE narrative of a developing nation such as Thailand, exploring its neoliberalism origin and the extent to which it can capture the essence and identity of IHE against the country's local, historical, and socio-cultural context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The commonly accepted definition of IHE is that of Knight's (2008), who refers to "a process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education". de Wit and Hunter (2015)

expand on Knight's proposition to emphasise the output of a higher quality education, and its relevance to society as whole. Altbach et al. (2009) define internationalisation in practical terms as the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement to respond to globalisation.

Neoliberalism proposes that greater economic freedom leads to greater economic and social progress for individuals and is inextricably linked to market-oriented reform. This study looks at the neoliberal lens through which much of the literature is written and questions it. Williams et al. (2021) offer a theoretical definition of IHE, favoured for the purpose of this research, which reflects the process as a social construction, rather than a normative one, avoiding prescription of any kind and allowing for a negotiation of meaning at the local, contextual level. This non-normative focus is particularly helpful when we study examples in the context of a developing country has had to accept, reject or adapt neoliberal agendas from the West.

This research will examine firstly the literature which derives from the neoliberal theoretical approach while putting forward the argument that the theoretical model and definition of IHE as proposed by Williams et al. (2021) provides a strong alternative focus for future research, rooted in analysis of the changing structures, focus and role of IHE in Thailand. This analysis of the literature points to a deviation away from the more normative literature and theoretical approaches which hint at what IHE 'should' be from a hegemonic Western viewpoint. The theoretical definition of IHE by Williams et al emphasizes the process of IHE as a social construction, in a fluid and constantly negotiated social context. This paper calls for more research based on this theoretical

approach and on the process of how meanings are negotiated within a specific social context, and how these subsequently influence the IHE agenda, strategy, and process. The author proposes that adopting the definition of IHE as proposed by Williams et al. (2020) will encourage and ensure that the process of IHE currently taking place in Thailand is effectively captured at the institutional level, in terms of the economic and social drivers, decisions, and strategies. In so doing, it will cast a new light on the opportunities and challenges posed by competition and cooperation, both powerful forces which continue to shape HE in the country.

### **Methods and Instruments**

This study draws on secondary data as a collection method, including sources spanning the last two decades from academic publications, books, reports, and other materials available online and in libraries. The sources include the Thai database Thaijo as well as international databases such as Scopus, Jstor and Google Scholar. University libraries in Thailand were also used to access these sources.

In order to identify the research which best represents the scope of literature on IHE in Thailand, the following steps were followed:

**1. Search terms were identified** that could be used for discovering the most relevant publications. A list of search terms related to IHE in Thailand (Appendix 1) was produced including the keywords “internationalisation of higher education” and “Thailand”, instead of more specific keywords such as “neoliberalism”, “student mobility” and “international programmes”. This approach ensured that the search was not biased in any way, and representative of the balance and spectrum of the literature in the field.

**2. Exclusion criteria** (Appendix 2) *was applied* to the initial 80 publications identified, to remove irrelevant works, including publications not written in English and those published before 2000. Thirty-eight (38) publications were subsequently selected for review.

**3. The literature was carefully analysed categorised** into two groups:

a) Trends of HE in Thailand that frame past and current debates on the global economic trends and socioeconomic imperatives behind the development of Thai IHE. This literature represents the IHE's Neoliberalism Perspective (20 articles).

b) Studies that provide experiential narratives on IHE from the institutions and the relevant actors' perspectives to investigate IHE adaptations and practice on the ground. This set of literature represents the Social Construction Perspective on IHE (18 articles).

**4. Each group was subsequently clustered based on common focus or thematic areas.**

For the neoliberalism perspective, five themes that emerged across publications were:

- a) IHE Neoliberalism Goals and Western Standards
- b) Student Mobility as IHE
- c) History of IHE: Neoliberalism Context
- d) IHE from Sectoral Perspective
- e) Towards Regionalisation of IHE

For the Social Construction Perspective, four themes were identified:

- a) Socially Constructed IHE Process
- b) Power, Leadership and Management
- c) History of IHE: Challenging the Neoliberalism Perspective



d) Actors' Interpretations: Realities on the Ground

## **Results and Discussion**

### **A. Focus of Literature on IHE in Thailand: Neoliberalism Perspective**

#### **1. IHE Neoliberal Goals and Western Standards**

One of the most noticeable attributes of the literature analysed on IHE in Thailand is the perceived imperative for the government and institutions to revise, re-think and re-evaluate their internationalisation efforts in order to align with the regional and global forces of neoliberal globalisation.

In Armstrong and Laksana's (2016) case study of Thai and Malaysian universities, the language of the paper is infused with a sense of urgency to reform in order to be able to compete and succeed. The assumption is that success at both national and institutional level resides in the development of stronger and more competitive mobility programmes. Ellingboe's conceptual model of successful internationalisation is used to propose a best practise model for IHE in Thailand. The premise is that internationalisation needs to be imposed or added in some way for the institution, ABAC in this instance, to be able to meet a certain global standard of effective internationalisation. The authors provide a normative list of what such an institution 'should' do in order to attain a satisfactory attainment of effective international processes and outcomes. The focus is on change to reach a set of pre-determined and assumed levels of internationalisation. The need to meet international standards seems to be the main thrust of their findings, a necessity reflected in numerous other similar studies. A top-down list of recommendations concludes their study findings thus

presenting us with a very broad proposal as to how institutions should act within prescribed or recommended structures and relationships at national and regional levels. The conclusions assume there is a consensus on best practise models of internationalisation; a one glove fits all approach. It is the insufficiencies of the university's internationalisation which merits attention in this literature, and how it should change to meet the neoliberal assumption of what internationalisation means. There is no intention to understand how internationalisation itself has developed in its own unique context, for what purpose and why.

Kanjananiyot and Chaitiamwong (2018) provide a similar account of the need for a greater focus on the quality of programmes in Thailand in order to reach international standards. The race to climb up the international rankings is accepted as the norm, as are the international trends which feature on the global IHE agenda. The “desired goals” of IHE are assumed to be the established norms. Government-related reports parallel the global agenda. With the aim of providing the Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy and the Office of the Higher Education Commission in Thailand with strategic recommendations for future IHE developments, Hines and Dockiao (2021) share a futurist perspective based on 14 emerging issues for Thailand. The focus again is primarily on the economic competitiveness at the national level and how universities can best serve a developing nation's desire to take its place within the developed world. The pathway is prescribed according to the global neoliberal agenda, with little attention paid to Thailand's own unique ability to adapt according to its own local context. For Scott and Guan (2023) and their comprehensive but birds-eye view exploration of the challenges

Thai HE institutions face in a “hyper-competitive environment”, the government needs to do more. As with so much of the neoliberal literature, the bottom line is financial stability and economic growth, with a distinct focus on the need for international student recruitment.

## **2. Student Mobility as IHE**

This review clearly reveals the centrality of the theme of student mobility in the literature on IHE in Thailand, consuming much of the IHE debate. From Jaroensubphayanont’s (2014) study on international student policy in Thailand to Snodin’s (2019) paper which explicitly sets out to “help Thai HE to be more marketable at a global scale”, the imperative of increasing the numbers of students from neighbouring countries and beyond dominates the discussion. Jampaklay et al. (2021) set this undisputed goal within the ASEAN context, focussing on education migration, including international students and student mobility, within the historical context of Thailand. Jampaklay et al point out the “competitive environment of international education in the ASEAN context”, and the necessity for Thai government policy and programs “to be improved to attract and retain international students”. This largest body of literature within the IHE field in Thailand offers relevant recommendations at national and institutional level for the creation of more ambitious and high-quality programmes.

This analysis of the literature confirms how the key economic driver behind student mobility strongly colours the existing research. While much of the global literature on IHE reflects a debate and discourse on the extent to which universities have or should become commercialised and engaged in market-oriented behavior (Rhodes & Slaughter, 2004), the majority of the literature on Thai IHE selected for the purpose of this study accepts the

status quo and explores how these institutions can improve their economic standing. The discussion also centres around dimensions associated with student mobility such as international programmes and international ranking in the context of IHE economic imperatives and explores how institutions can become more entrepreneurial in a post-industrial economy. The focus is on knowledge as a commodity to be transformed into profit-oriented programmes and activities (Rhodes & Slaughter, 2004).

### **3. History of IHE: Neoliberalism Context**

The study discovered a substantial body of literature which examines the evolution and history of internationalisation in Thailand, where attempts are made to encapsulate how Thailand has adopted the Westernisation of higher education over the years. Fry and Bi's account (2013) of three historical periods of reform in Thailand is theoretically framed around the "quest for equity and empowerment in a neoliberal capitalist regime in an era of dramatic Globalization". Their focus is on the major overhaul of education in Thailand following the National Education Act of 1999. The authors also discuss the increasing awareness and importance of ranking and international competitiveness during this decade. As well as its strong and unquestioning emphasis on the global neoliberal agenda as adopted by Thailand, a striking element of this particular study is its overwhelming focus on the internal machinations of the education reform in Thailand. Their cursory reference to international capabilities as one of the areas crucial for Thailand's education system, particularly the need for students with an international outlook and language skills, is the closest this paper comes to examining external factors driving the reform agenda. Heavy on detail related to administrative restructuring, it fails to connect these reforms to their powerful

drivers and to the demands faced by Thailand during this period to internationalise its education system. The relationship between national policy and the commercialisation of HE is the focus of Boossabong's (2017) study, one of many which attempts to determine the extent to which privatization and quality control of the universities have activated and served the neoliberal transformation of the sector over time.

#### **4. IHE from a Sectoral Perspective**

A tendency towards the neoliberal goals of IHE was also found in a large body of research which highlights IHE in specific sectors. In the work of Sangpikul (2009) on the hospitality and tourism sector, the neoliberal interpretation is clearly stated from the outset as “aspects of internationalisation from Western perspectives” are declared to form the foundation of the investigation. While the study is clearly in an Asian context, the driving theories and positioning of the internationalisation process are clearly rooted in the West. The author explores how the vocational sector should respond to the demands of globalisation, with the implication that the institutions mentioned in Thailand are subjects of the process, not entirely passive, but responding to the overriding demands of the global neoliberal trends in internationalisation. The focus is very much based on the widely accepted definition of IHE as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension (e.g., a perspective, activity or program) into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (Knight, 2003, p. 2). The applicability and broad flexibility of this defining approach is emphasized in this, as well as in several other papers, with the suggestion that the local context may adapt this definitive thrust to its own unique needs, processes and working culture. The concerns

of Sangpikul and like-minded scholars lie in how Thai institutions adopt and adapt these Western-born prescriptions. Rhea's (2016) study also makes an attempt to bring in local Thai approaches to the discussion on the influence of the global markets in education, but it is the international, global and regional dimensions which pervade the research. The focus in this body of research is firmly on what is lacking, and the reference points on which the argument is developed are taken from the definition of framework as proposed by Knight and others. The question posed is 'How can the institution meet this framework?' The emphasis is on concrete outcomes, changes in human resources, an increase in student mobility, an adaptation of the curriculum.

### **5. Towards Regionalisation of IHE**

Unsurprisingly, since the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, one third of the literature on IHE in Thailand identified focussed on the Thai government's national economic imperatives within the context of ASEAN. Thailand has long held dear the prospect of becoming the main regional education hub for ASEAN. Rooted in Thai perspectives and three institutions in particular, it is McBride's (2012) study which provides the most critical and thoughtful account. Mc Bride considers how the country's leadership in the creation of the AEC provides a unique opportunity for its internationalisation efforts, only for the lack of a unified and strategic approach by the government to hinder the realisation of this potential, with each institution seemingly following their own plan with little integration and structure at the national level. Chao's extensive research on the regionalisation of HE and integrated student mobility across the region is another body of work which enhances the debate on how IHE can best serve the

region and its economic and social development, as well as the challenges and opportunities presented by the growth of intra-ASEAN student mobility schemes (Chao, 2020).

Further studies have reflected on the role of Thai culture in the forging of IHE, and therefore Thailand's uniqueness within the region. As regionalisation has become a key aspect of IHE, Rhein (2017) presents an analysis of the challenges facing International Programmes at Bachelor and Masteral level and recommendations on how to combat them. Rhein takes one specific institution as a unit of analysis, but a strong underlying critical approach of the need to forgo Thai cultural dimensions, especially Confucian ideology, and adopt the cultural characteristics of the West, somewhat mars the claims made. A more nuanced study of the tensions which may exist at institutional level between Thai culture and that of a more international and regional bent, would contribute more positively to our understanding of the actual IHE process. Thanosawan and Laws (2013) provide a compelling argument as to the differing views of what global citizenship should mean in the curriculum, focusing on differences between international programmes and Thai programmes, and seeking to analyse how Thailand attempts to fit into this narrative at the regional level of ASEAN. However, this study also fails to delve deeper into the views of the subjects involved and into the processes of thinking which create meanings within IHE.

## **B. Adaptations and Realities on the Ground: A Social Construction Perspective**

### **1. Socially Constructed IHE Process**

Sangpikul's (2009) analysis of the studies conducted by Sinlarat and Mok reflect the rare calling for greater attention

to be given to the actual creation of IHE within the Thai context. Sangpikul offers a critical analysis of how Western knowledge has been transferred to Thai society in recent times, referencing Sinlarat who urges the Thai academic community to create a new body of knowledge (Sinlarat, 2005). The argument put forward is that Thailand should move away from a “knowledge-receiving culture” to a “knowledge-producing one.” Sinlarat (2007) cautions educational leaders to be circumspect in adopting the global trend of internationalization into the Thai educational system. Likewise, Mok (2007) warns against copying Western-driven IHE without proper adaptation and contextualisation. Sinlarat (2005) goes on to examine the concept of internationalisation and its place in Thai HE through engaging with how program quality, students’ learning opportunities, faculty development, and global understanding can be best understood within a Thai socio-cultural context. This study also analysed the comprehensive studies on the cultural influences on HE in Thailand by Bovornsiri et al. (1996) where the authors look at the social role of HE institutions. Nilphan (2005) also sets Thai IHE in a macro-political and socio-economic context, an attempt to approach IHE from a local perspective but remains shy of adopting a strong socially and contextually- driven theoretical approach). It can be concluded that these works are united in their circumspection and caution vis-à-vis globalisation and the prescribed global ‘standards’ of IHE, but nevertheless do not aim to unearth greater understanding as to how IHE is actually adopted through the blend of the local merging with the global.

Another body of work examined as part of this research consisted of institutional level research on responses to IHE. One such study was a multiple site case study on the process



of restructuring in three Thai universities. In Filibeck's (2008) work, cultural processes, and social factors and how they influence the actual process of re-structuring as a response to globalisation (and we may infer IHE as a component) is at the heart of this thorough study. Market and economic forces infuse the research but very much as an integral part of the local culture. The focus is on how the neoliberal ideology functions within the specific locale of each institution. In this respect, what Filibeck introduces is a locally rooted bottom-up view of IHE, and a discerning examination reflecting Williams et al.'s perspective of IHE as being a socially constructed adaptation despite the overwhelming global narrative and assumptions of neoliberalism. He posits that that "globalization is concerned with understanding how a given society/culture uses and manipulates indigenous market/economy strategies in order to accomplish political and economic goals in that society".

Drawing on Baudrillard's theory, to deconstruct the processes of internationalisation through the prism of simulacra and simulation, Ferguson (2018) tackles the issues of privileged access to international programmes at the institution where he works. His study is a highly abstract and theoretical take on his dissatisfaction with the elitism of such programmes, designed to make profit and to serve market needs. It is a rare critical article on IHE at the institutional level and in many ways, lays bare the weaknesses and fallacies of IPs in Thailand. While his argument is clear and exposes the self-interested goals of neoliberalism in IHE, his study would be greatly enhanced by broadening the inputs to those who are affected by such programmes- the lecturers, the students, the parents, and the decision-makers. It neglects any form of discussion of the social processes which bring about "simulacra and simulation" in the first

place and asks the reader to accept his own sole judgement based on his own experience of working in such an environment.

## **2. Power, Leadership and Management**

Another dimension of the more limited IHE literature which follows a counter-narrative to, or challenges, the global neoliberal approach is that which highlights power, leadership, and management styles within the institutions themselves. Sinthunava's (2009) analysis of six Rajabhat Universities and the use of leadership dimensions to differentiate from other institutions sees the author taking the institution itself as a unit of analysis. In this study, it is the process of how leadership works within IHE in a very specific cultural milieu which draws the researcher's attention, eschewing the global trappings of what IHE leadership 'should' be. Sinthunava studies both leaders' resistance and acceptance to changes to the decision-making structures as well as the nature of decision-making at the institutional level. The new institutional autonomy brought about by education reform saw Rajhabat institutions attain university status and therefore become subject to the same pressures of IHE as established universities. Sinthunava explores how each Rajhabat University in her study reacted and changed in their own way, with the role of the President and Vice-Presidents examined carefully to see how this process varied from institution to institution. It is a study which focusses on how the leadership process was challenged and changed at the local, institutional level by the neoliberal drive towards greater institutional autonomy and efficiency, as well as leadership accountability. Lavankura (2017) explores further the politics in higher education and how leadership affects IHE, a strong contribution to the literature which sees these constructions as spontaneous and socially constructed. Lavankura studies how the

“location of authority” changed during these times of education reform. For this author, it is the constantly shifting “conflicts and consensus” which form the focal point of the research. While every level is examined from a historical perspective, it is Lavankura’s assessment of the power balance at the university level which explains how the process of engaging with the market clashes with the more traditional bureaucratic values of prestige and security. Lavankura goes some way to studying the social construction of power between bureaucrats and academics within higher education institutions in Thailand, against a backdrop of globalisation and internationalisation of operations as well as the curriculum. The exploration of “the internal dynamics of different key actors” provides valuable insights into how contextually driven and socially-rooted power, leadership and management are when it comes to enacting significant change.

### **3. History of IHE: Challenging the Neoliberalism Perspective**

Other works challenge the historical path on which IHE has come to be accepted as the norm in Thailand. This research analysed Maitrarat et al. ’s “The History of Higher Education in Thailand, Confronting Challenges” (2021) and found that it does not position Thailand from a Western perspective, and refrains from “positioning the higher education system...within discourses that demand wholesale system change towards neoliberal models”. This comprehensive and insightful book displays a refreshing acceptance and exploration of the complexities of context, from the shifting dynamics of geopolitical instabilities to social, cultural and economic changes occurring within the higher education system. In its discussion of ‘Internationalisation, Power, and Knowledge’ it claims that Thailand is caught up in what Smith (1999) has described as “a construct of human

imagination that serves to organize and mobilize certain forms of action in certain ways”. Maitrat et al. call a spade a spade. The “Western spin....clarified that neoliberal economic and social policies, as they played out in Western contexts, needed to be embraced and mobilised. Working on the supposition that such policy and practice is able to be unproblematically generalised across national contexts, the point clarified was that higher education would flourish under a regime of economic rationalisation, new managerial models, and marketization”. This book challenges the dominant global perspective on IHE, as well as other aspects of higher education reform in Thailand, and exposes how the concept of HE as a tradable good became a part of the neo-liberal discourse where the marketplace creates greater efficiencies, productivities, and competitiveness, with the accumulation of wealth coming at the expense of equity.

#### **4. Actors’ Interpretations: Realities the Ground**

The final category of literature in the review consists of studies related to university actors’ interpretations of IHE. Burford et al. (2019, 2020) have made significant contributions to the local denouement of IHE through their writings on academics’ perspectives of IHE at the institutional level, providing a voice to foreign lecturers for example, who are integral to the success of the IPs in Thailand. In this study, the authors explore how foreign lecturers on international programmes are labelled as experts and seen as contributing towards the economic competitiveness of Thailand and of the higher education sector in particular. They also claim that such teachers are marginalised within the system and often treated with indifference. Burford et al. (2019, 2020) through interviews and analysis of perspectives on the ground, successfully

discover the diverse voices of the actors within the milieu where IHE actually takes place. They clearly convey the tensions between opportunities and threats which are inevitably and constantly at play in the fluid interpretations by different actors and stakeholders of what IHE should be and how it should be implemented.

Jamklai (2012) followed by Snodin et al. (2021) have also turned their focus to international academics to Thailand and their experiences of the education system. In Jamklai's study, in-depth qualitative interviews are adopted to gain a deeper understanding of, among other aspects, the foreign lecturers' views of globalisation in Thailand and how higher education institutions are responding to its opportunities and challenges. Snodin et al. similarly seek the "lived experience" of those actors on the ground who contribute towards and shape the direction of IHE within the local community of their host institutions. The authors draw practical recommendations for new internationalisation policies based on this data in order to improve the quality of such academic migration and mobility.

Furthermore, Chalapati (2007) draws on case studies of two English-medium business graduate programs where Thai cultural characteristics have a profound impact on key actors' attitudes towards international education, particularly in the cross-cultural teaching and learning settings. Chalapati's interest goes beyond the measuring of IHE success according to global norms. Rather, the study seeks to understand how attitudes and the responses of academics, leaders and students within institutions actually create and shape the very essence of IHE within those particular contexts,

The studies mentioned in this section, while drowned by the overwhelming focus of the literature on neoliberal driven economic incentives of student mobility, nevertheless offer strong glimpses into the insights gained from listening to the voices of those on the ground who contribute towards, and thus continuously create and mold, the shape and content of IHE in Thailand.

### **C. Proposed Counter-Narrative**

If the dominance of the neoliberal economic imperative over the HE system in Thailand, as in other countries, is more than evident, so it is that the overriding focus of the literature on IHE in Thailand clearly stems from strong neoliberal assumptions. This analysis of the literature determines that the focus of much of the research in the field takes the neoliberal theory as a basis and explores specific areas of IHE such as student mobility, adopting the perspective and narrative of Western neoliberalism. Indeed, the very definition of IHE adopted and assumed by the literature, is steeped in neoliberal assumptions, often overshadowing or peripheralising the local context and socially determined dimension of IHE. While this approach remains pertinent and relevant, this paper argues that a less Western-dependent desire to reform would lead to a deeper understanding of the actual process of IHE, which, in turn, returns the ownership of the IHE creation process to the institution and to its own cultural milieu.

This paper posits that such a theoretical approach and narrative in the research would allow for a greater focus on the process of how individuals' understandings of concepts are formed and how meanings are negotiated within a specific social context, and how these influence the IHE agenda, strategy, and process. A study of the indigenization of neoliberal competitive economic

values within universities must take into account a wider range of factors and voices shaping decisions and delivery. Meanings are created when people interact, discuss, make decisions, generate ideas, and implement changes together in pairs, teams, departments or faculties, within the confines or otherwise of the history of national, local and institutional cultures. IHE should be seen as such a process, a dynamic and vibrant, socially situated phenomenon which is constantly and actively twisting, shaping and molding the views and actions of all those involved. It is not the result of a static definition of what should be taking place at institutions of HE globally. It does not represent a subservience to a set of values or ideology developed in the West. Nor is it, in fact, definable.

Overall, the literature and narrative on IHE in Thailand selected for this study favours the region, the state, the nation, and the education system itself as units of analysis. There is a scarcity of analysis from within the institutions themselves, as to how complex processes brought on by globalisation unfold on the ground. This process does not take place in isolation, and an understanding of the external influences and factors is crucial. When we do encounter studies at the micro level, whether programme, faculty or institutional, the stance of such studies often represents a response to the global normative view of what IHE should be.

Several of the publications explored in this study attempt to dig deeper into the process of IHE construction at the local, institutional level, suggesting an alternative narrative already exists. However, this literature remains scarce. The purpose of this paper is not to dismiss the excellent research conducted in student mobility, international programmes, and other dimensions of IHE which have come to be accepted as a part of the global IHE 'norm'. Rather, it

is to highlight a gap in the thinking around IHE and in the identification of local processes and socially constructed negotiations and interpretations ‘on the ground’ which allow us to challenge the neoliberal assumptions of how IHE ‘should be’ and to decipher what it is and how it develops in different contexts and for different actors. This author proposes that this knowledge within specific socio-cultural and geographic contexts, a counter narrative to the global neoliberal IHE discourse, has not been extensively explored in the literature on IHE in Thailand.

### Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the overwhelming focus of the literature on IHE in Thailand is situated within the assumed and accepted dominance of what IHE ‘should’ be as prescribed by the West. It has attempted to explain how the majority of the literature frames the imperatives and narratives of IHE development in Thailand mainly through the exigencies of the market and neoliberal economic ideology. Nowhere is this more evident than in the dominant focus on student mobility, the urgency of its required growth and the dimensions of efficiency, management and promotion as required drivers. It can also be seen in the way researchers focus on national and institutional responses to the global IHE agenda, and, often, the weaknesses of the Thai HE system in meeting the so-called ‘international standards. The emphasis is on providing evidence of a lack of quality or effective policies and strategies to bring Thailand up to the level required globally. While this may be the case, one must question the validity of the assumptions that are at play here.



Fundamentally, the literature seems to be marching to the sound of Knight's prescribed definition of IHE. Of course, this definition of IHE enables us all to focus on key dimensions which lead to successful internationalisation across a range of contexts, from developed to developing countries; a convenient glove for the many hands participating in IHE across our diverse world. It has been widely accepted and adopted for very good reasons. It provides a proven template, inclusive in its considerations of all the actors involved.

However, this paper has argued that purely neoliberal interpretations of Thai IHE cannot accurately represent and explain practices and realities at the institutional level. IHE should be seen and examined within its unique context, serving different needs, ambitions, and realities. This is a call for more research which seeks a counter-narrative that can explain IHE as experienced by local institutions and actors within their own social contexts; IHE as deeply influenced by the neoliberal narrative, without a doubt, but also IHE as the seed growing in a particular patch of earth surrounded by its own unique environment, whose growth and characteristics are ultimately defined by the local.

This approach requires sensitivity and skill. Respondents may be wary of sharing their views especially if they are deemed to be of a critical nature. With a genuine focus on listening to people's voices, and respecting their confidentiality, this author believes the rewards of such research will lead to a more balanced and deeper understanding of IHE in developing nations such as Thailand, and to a more democratic theoretical approach to such research worldwide. It is in this space of evolving meaning-creation at the local level where researchers may gain new and significant insights into considerations on "how global hegemonic discourses of education

purposes and governance should be interpreted, resisted and negotiated” (Rizvi, 2017).

**Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares that there were no conflicts of interest.

**Appendix 1**

List of Search Terms
internationalisation of higher education + Thailand
public higher education + Thailand
universities + Thailand + internationalisation
internationalisation of higher education + Southeast Asia
public higher education + Southeast Asia
universities + Southeast Asia + internationalisation
literature + internationalisation of higher education + Thailand
literature + public higher education + Thailand
literature + universities + Thailand + internationalisation
literature + public higher education + Southeast Asia
literature + universities + Southeast Asia + internationalisation

**Appendix 2**

Exclusion Criteria
Publications not written in English
Work published before 2000
Non-peer-reviewed articles
Articles unrelated to Thailand
Articles on basic education (primary and secondary level)
Reviews and editorials

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