

Developing Economy Universities Competing in a Global Market: Evidence from Thailand

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INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The increased internationalization of higher education (HE) has given rise to an increased focus on the marketing of academic services internationally. HE has historically been one of the most international of all human endeavors, and there is a long tradition of scholars traveling across borders to seek knowledge (Bevis and Lucas 2007; Meek 2013). The total number of students attending university around the world continues to grow while the number of students studying outside of their home country has more than tripled since 1990 (UNESCO 2013).

While in the past, internationalization of HE mostly involved students and scholars traveling to the physical location of the university or institute of HE, in more recent times, the internationalization of HE has been rapidly expanding and evolving with universities now using a variety of techniques to provide education to foreign students, including universities traveling, sometimes physically, other times virtually, to the locations

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of the students (Altbach 2007; Bashir 2007; Knight 2007; Lanzendorf 2008; Levy 2007; Naidoo and Wu 2014). Therefore, the internationalization of HE and the ability of universities from developed economies to attract foreign students and expand internationally have important implications for universities from developing economies.

The literature on the internationalization of HE has been mostly focused on the strategies of universities originating from Western countries, especially countries where English is the native language (Dwivedi 2013; Marginson 2006; Maringe and Mourad 2012; Skinner and Blackey 2010). For example, when looking at the international competitiveness of UK Universities, Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) only used the HE systems in the USA, Australia, and Canada, all developed economies with English as the native language, for comparison.

Yet, the internationalization of HE in more recent times has also involved and impacted universities from developing economies (Bashir 2007; Jowi 2012; Mazzarol and Soutar 2012; Svenson 2009). It has been proposed the challenges faced by universities in developing economies, such as severe resource shortages, brain drain, and lack of opportunities for graduates, can be significantly different from the challenges faced by universities from more developed countries when creating and implementing policies designed to attract international students (Maringe and Mourad 2012).

Studies of marketing strategies of universities from developing economies focusing on the domestic market include looking at brand equity in business schools in India (Sharma et al. 2013), student satisfaction in universities in Syria (Al-Fattal and Ayoubi 2013), branding practices in HE institutions in Malaysia (Goi et al. 2014), student perceptions of quality of education in Bangladesh (Akareem and Hossain 2012), students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness in business schools in Egypt (Mahrous and Kortam 2012), and the impact of trust on student loyalty in Brazil (Sampaio et al. 2012). But there have been fewer studies focusing on strategic marketing practices to attract international students in developing economies, although there have been some studies measuring foreign student satisfaction with their education in these markets (e.g. Kruanak and Ruangkanjanases 2014; Ngamkamollert and Ruangkanjanases 2015; Zeeshan et al. 2013).

Therefore, as advocated by Naidoo and Wu (2014: 555), an exploratory study was conducted into the internationalization and marketing strategies of a university from a non-English-speaking country to help gain

a broader understanding of the changing competitive environment within the international HE industry.

INTERNATIONAL MARKETING, COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES, AND POSITIONING

International Marketing

In the marketing literature, there is a general agreement that international and domestic marketing have both some similarities and differences, although the extent of the similarities and differences depend on many contextual factors. Vrontis et al. (2009) acknowledged the ongoing debate in the international marketing literature about whether it is most effective for specific firms to globally standardize marketing efforts or to adapt practices for the specific conditions found in each different country. The authors found the most significant factors pulling toward localizing marketing efforts internationally are differences in market development and physical conditions as well as legal and political factors; while lowering costs is the primary factor pulling organizations to use more standardized marketing practices across borders. Both factors would appear to apply to the HE sector creating opposing pressures.

Perry (1990) found there were four primary views on international marketing: (1) as an extension of domestic marketing, (2) as servicing a collection of different national markets, (3) a manifestation of generic marketing, and (4) using an undifferentiated global approach. Yet, Perry also reported the academic literature on international marketing has been dominated by the US view which is based on the assumption of having access to a large and affluent domestic market as well as being attractive to various smaller foreign markets. These assumptions and categories may not automatically apply to organizations such as universities originating from other environments such as those found in developing economies.

Competitive Advantages

The centerpiece of a successful marketing strategy is the creation and communication of competitive advantages. Competitive advantages come from unique attributions of an organization which allow the organization to create customer value better, or differently, than competitors. Ma (1999) found there are three generic sources of competitive advantage, ownership

of specific assets, access to distribution and supply, and competencies coming from specific knowledge and capabilities. However, Wong and Merrilees (2007) reported on the importance of branding in international marketing and as an additional source of competitive advantage. Moreover, Passemard and Kleiner (2000) pointed out there was no single universal strategy that can be used in creating competitive advantages in all industries and organizations, and an organization's positioning within an industry will have an important impact on its creation of competitive advantages and organizational success.

Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is also considered an important component of a successful marketing strategy and is concerned with how a brand is perceived by customers in relationship to competitors according to a variety of criteria including quality, value, or uniqueness (Sujan and Bettman, 1989). In the HE sector, a university's name, place, reputation, and marketing efforts by the university combine to create a brand which distinguishes one university from another.

Porter (1985) proposed success in business comes from gaining competitive advantage through the effective use of one of three generic positioning strategies, cost leadership, differentiation, or a focused/niche strategy. A cost leadership strategy is used to attract price-sensitive customers, a differentiation strategy is based on creating unique features which customers value and distinguish a product or service from those offered by competitors. While a focused, or niche, strategy is designed to appeal to a narrow segment of the market and to focus efforts on meeting the needs of this very specific and limited target market, it would appear these generic strategies could be used in creating marketing strategies in the HE industry to the same extent as in other industries.

Market Segmentation

The practice of market segmentation has been found to be a very effective strategic marketing tool. The idea of market segmentation is, instead of trying to market to the entire market using a single strategy, to split the market into various subgroups. Once the market has been split into multiple segments, an organization can choose which segments to concentrate on and can develop specific marketing approaches to the segment

or segments selected. “The purpose of segmentation is the concentration of marketing energy and force on subdividing to gain a competitive advantage within the segment” (Goyat 2011: 45).

*Marketing, Competitive Advantage, Positioning,
and Segmentation in Developing Economies*

While the principles of marketing, creating competitive advantages, positioning, and segmentation might be similar in both developing and developed economies, the practices will be greatly affected by the different environments. When looking at measures of the competitive environment of nations, developed economies almost always are listed at the top (Ju and Sohn 2014). Some of the disadvantages facing organizations from developing economies include working in environments characterized by lower levels of demand, less sophisticated local customers, lack of access to skilled workers, and the lack of ability to effectively use existing knowledge (Shenkar 2009). On the other hand, organizations originating from developing economies sometimes have some competitive advantages. These advantages include lower labor costs, flexible ownership structures, and experience operating in unstable environments (Cuervo-Cazurra and Genc 2008; Seshanna 2009; Shenkar 2009).

As environmental factors influence competitive advantages on which marketing strategies and practices are built upon, the international marketing strategy of a university from a developing economy is expected to be significantly different from strategies used by universities originating in more developed economies (Maringe and Mourad 2012).

MARKETING, COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE, POSITIONING,
AND SEGMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Marketing in HE

Due to the increasingly competitive nature of the HE industry, universities are increasingly focusing on gaining competitive advantages, resulting in a trend where the distinction between academic management and business management is becoming blurred; resulting in more emphasis being placed on the marketing activities of universities and their programs (Calvo-Porrall et al. 2013; Curtis et al. 2009; Lai et al. 2014). However, the merits and ethics of using a marketing approach have been questioned

due to the perceived unique position the HE sector has in society (Nguyen and Rosetti 2013; Ramachandran 2010). De Hann (2015: 55) found while many educational professionals were comfortable with traditional academic competition, there were concerns over issues of maintaining the quality of education when universities turn too far toward a competitive marketing orientation. However, if current trends persist, most universities will most likely continue to put more emphasis on marketing to attract students due to the increasingly competitive nature of HE in the twenty-first century.

Competitive Advantages Within the HE Sector

One of the most obvious competitive advantages universities seek is associated with the intangible perceptions of prestige and reputation (Aghaz et al. 2015; Dholakia and Acciardo 2014). Prestige and reputation are mostly acquired from tradition and university rankings, which are published by a variety of sources. The top of the world rankings of universities is dominated by schools from the most developed economies, while the universities in Thailand and most other developing economies lack the resources, finances, and traditions to compete with the better funded universities and achieve high world rankings (Phusavat et al. 2012).

Positioning in HE

De Haan (2015) reported that while these rankings systems were an important component of the marketing strategies of research universities, they were of little concern to customers seeking to apply to what she called applied universities. Applied universities are more likely to create competitive advantage internationally through geographic location, the living environment of the university, attractiveness of the country the university is located in, and the availability of courses taught in a language the students can use. Therefore, it is likely the international marketing of a research university with a well-established reputation will be considerably different from marketing newer and less established applied universities. The findings of Asaad et al. (2015) suggest in international marketing, universities with higher rankings and stronger international reputations use more direct marketing efforts which leverage their reputations and high rankings while lesser known universities often use more indirect marketing efforts. With newer and less well-known institutes of HE, it appears that carefully planned

and well-executed marketing efforts do have a positive impact on how an organization is perceived (Goi et al. 2014; Idris and Whitfield 2014).

Therefore, while universities in Thailand and other emerging economies are unlikely to create competitive advantages through positioning themselves as elite research universities, there are possibilities to position the universities internationally as attractive applied universities through the use of a well-designed and well-executed marketing plan.

Cheung et al. (2010) found in the developing country of India, developed Western countries were the preferred destination for students seeking an overseas education, and the primary drivers to study abroad were (1) failure to obtain a place in a local university, due to intense competition, (2) expecting to be able to obtain a better job with an overseas degree, and (3) lack of satisfaction with the local educational system. In general, many studies indicate students considering studying internationally show a preference for universities in English-speaking nations with developed economies (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Meek 2013; UNESCO 2013). This preference would appear to limit the availability of positioning strategies for universities from developing economies, especially when the native language is not widely spoken internationally.

Branding in Universities

While there has been limited research on the topic of branding in HE, the concept is expected to increasingly become a central feature in most universities' marketing strategies (Calvo-Porrall et al. 2013; Casidy 2013; Durkin et al. 2012). Mazzarol and Soutar (2012: 727) reported that a positive brand image was associated with student satisfaction and retention, but most universities have not traditionally thought and planned in terms of branding, at least in the ways advocated in the marketing literature. It is expected branding strategies for many established universities will build upon their existing strategies to gain and retain academic reputations; yet there might be opportunities for newer and less-established universities to develop a different type of brand image which can be used as a competitive advantage. Furey et al. (2014) found more established universities tried to leverage their brand image by appealing to aspirations of the potential students while newer schools mostly emphasized their nurturing and specialized nature in their marketing efforts.

Sharma et al. (2013) found most educational branding worldwide focuses on differentiating one university or program from others, and while

top-ranking universities can use their prestigious histories and legacies to create differentiated advantages, other schools often struggle to create a unique value proposition which sets the university apart from the competition, Furey et al. (2014) believed branding, due to the complex nature of HE and the variety of programs in most universities and colleges, was an even more difficult task than in more traditional commercial contexts. One of the challenges arise out of the desire for a consistent single brand image for an entire university, but trying to create this general image that works for the entire university makes it difficult to create differentiated brand images for different programs which appeal to individual students.

There is some evidence an active marketing program can have a positive impact on creating a more positive brand image. For example, Idris and Whitfield (2014) found choices over corporate visual identity, and (re)naming a university had an impact on how the university's brand was perceived, while Goi et al. (2014) reported private universities had more active marketing and branding programs which were correlated with better brand images than were found in public universities in Malaysia.

Market Segmentation in HE

The international HE sector consists of various types of institutions, from elite universities with worldwide reputations to local vocation schools. As different universities have different target markets, the use of market segmentation to identify and concentrate marketing efforts on the most attractive segments for an individual organization would likely be an important feature of most marketing programs within the HE sector. While the concept of market segmentation has not been widely explored in the international educational literature, Bock et al. (2014) suggested:

The objective of market segmentation in higher education is to improve the competitive position of the college or university by dividing the diverse college/ university market into groups of student-consumers with distinct needs and wants and then identifying which market segment it can serve effectively (12).

The authors also discovered three general segments of HE students, one segment which considers all criteria as important; another which places a priority on the financial aspects of attending a specific university and yet another segment which places a moderate priority for all criteria.

In the minds of potential students, each institution of higher learning falls into a specific category, and many of these categories are hierarchal

in nature. Finch et al. (2013), in a study of universities and colleges in Canada, found the category an institution belongs to has an anchoring effect on an institution's positioning strategy and the reputation of the institution. A similar effect is likely to apply to the international marketing of universities. The perception coming from belonging to a classification based on the level of economic development of the country a university is located in is likely to have a strong anchoring effect and would likely limit the positioning options available to universities from developing economies. Universities in developing economies are perceived as being in a different category, generally at a lower level, than are universities from more economically developed countries

NATIONAL BRAND IMAGE

The national brand image of a product has a significant impact on consumer decisions and preferences. The perceived country of origin of a product has been shown to have an influence on the brand preferences and buying patterns of customers for both goods and services (e.g. Grimes 2005; Kalamova and Konrad 2010; Kan et al. 2014). Also consumers and customers, from both developed and developing economies, often express a preference in many product categories for brands associated with economically developed nations (e.g. Ar and Kara 2014; Contractor 2013; Herstein et al. 2014; Li et al. 2014; Murtiasih et al. 2014).

This preference for brands associated with developed economies appears to also apply to the HE sector. Cheung et al. (2010) found an overwhelming preference of Indian students considering overseas HE for studying in the English-speaking countries like Australia, UK, and USA. Worldwide, the most popular destinations for foreign students are Western countries, with the USA and UK attracting the most foreign students, and Asian countries sending the largest proportion of students abroad; however, there appears to be a shift in the trends as a higher percentage of international students in recent years are choosing to go to non-Western locations, including in developing economies, often closer to home (USIS 2014). This preference for Western education and the changing trends would appear to create both challenges and opportunities for universities in developing economies, including in Thailand.

With the exception of a few elite universities, due to the sheer volume of different institutions of HE worldwide, for international students, the brand image of an individual university may be less important than the national brand image of the country of origin of the university. The primary

attraction for many international students might be to study abroad or to study in a specific country as opposed to studying at a specific university. Williams et al. (2012) reported on the challenges universities throughout Africa have in gaining international acceptance and recognition due to negative perceptions of a brand name originating from Africa or individual countries within Africa. Despite efforts of individual institutions of higher learning, it is likely the international reputation of the majority of non-elite universities will be closely tied to the country of origin. For example, Australian universities on average have a different reputation and are considered of higher status when compared to the universities from the countries, mostly in Asia, where the majority of the foreign students in Australia originate (Meeks 2013).

In addition to universities, countries, such as the UK, have also actively marketed themselves as centers of HE (Mazzarol and Soutar 2012: 729). De Haan (2015: 56) made the point that a competitive advantage for a university is created by external recognition and competitive advantages are not internally defined. Therefore, most individual universities can probably do little to separate their identity/brand in the minds of individual students from that of the brand image of the country where they are located. This would appear to result in international branding strategies for most universities to be most effective if individual universities work in collaboration with national governments. Supporting this idea, Cheung et al. (2011) reported the national educational policies and promotional activities of the government had a positive impact on the ability of individual Hong Kong universities to attract an increased number of international students.

While both organizational and national brand images impact consumer perceptions of quality and preferences, with universities, these two images are expected to be strongly linked when perceived by potential international students.

LANGUAGE

While there are a significant number of languages used in international education, it is the worldwide growth of the use of English as both the language of business and academia that would appear to have driven the creation of a global market for HE (Altbach 2007). Brumfit (2004: 166) asserts, “globally, English is already the language of higher education,” while Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) and UNESCO (2013)

recognized the dominance of universities from major English-speaking countries in international education.

The domination of English as the global language of education and academia has been acknowledged, commented on, criticized, and analyzed by a variety of authors (e.g. Altbach et al. 2009; Coleman 2006; Crystal 2003; Held et al. 1999; Kumaravadivelu 2012; Lehtikoinen 2004). In addition to gaining a degree and technical knowledge, one of the motivations of many students to study abroad is to become fluent in a foreign language, with English being the first choice for most students. Therefore, being located in a country where English is the native language would appear to give many advantages to universities in these countries, while increasing the challenges for universities in locations where English is not as widely spoken.

Internationalization and international marketing options would appear to be quite different for universities coming from countries where English is the native language as opposed to countries where English is not the native language (Bulajeva and Hogan-Brun 2014; Cots et al. 2014). In universities coming from English-speaking countries, internationalization does not normally require operating in foreign languages, nor are these universities required to create new programs taught in a foreign language to specifically target foreign students. However in other locations, the majority of the university programs are taught in the local language, and these programs taught in the local language do not attract international students, except in locations where the local language is also commonly spoken in multiple countries (e.g. Arabic, Spanish, or Russian).

Creating academic programs taught in English has been used as a strategy to internationalize and attract foreign students by universities in many countries where English is not the native language. For example, use of English as a medium of instruction has risen in continental European universities; and most of the programs taught in English in these universities are at the post-graduate level and are expected to attract a large number of foreign students (Wachter 2008).

INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION IN ASIA AND THAILAND

Individuals from Asian countries have been very actively involved in the internationalization of HE, as the majority of the world's international students come from Asia (UNESCO 2013). China supplies more outbound

students than any other country, but so far it has only attracted a small number of inbound students (Yue 2013). South Korea is another country known for supplying large number of foreign students, although in recent years because of the government working in cooperation with individual South Korean universities, some success has been seen in creating more international educational programs to attract more foreign students and professors (Kwon 2013).

Within Asia, due to the diversity of languages and cultures, as well as political rivalries and histories of hostilities, there has been very limited integration of international education (Hawkins 2012). However, the current trends toward greater political and economic integration found within the region would appear to present opportunities for universities in Thailand and other developing economies in Asia to attract an increasing number of foreign students and explore new internationalization options. Yet, success will likely require strong marketing efforts which are aligned with strategies supported by a university's top management and the nation's government officials.

For example, due to both national and individual universities' policies and marketing efforts, the number of foreign students studying in Malaysian universities tripled from 2002 to 2010 with the total in 2010 nearing 100,000 (Tham 2013). Previously, Malaysia had mostly been considered as a source of outbound students but strong marketing efforts by individual universities and active government policies have created more balance between inbound and outbound students. Malaysian universities have been especially successful in attracting students from the Middle East, Indonesia and China (Sirat et al. 2013) suggesting the universities in the country have positioned themselves as centers of learning in the Islamic world as well as a lower cost alternative to universities in developed economies for Asian students (Zeeshan et al. 2013). While Malaysian universities have had success in attracting foreign students, the research results from Lai et al. (2015) suggest Malaysian universities might want to consider more focus on quality of education, especially teaching quality, to increase student satisfaction.

In contrast to countries which have seen significant economic development in recent decades, universities from countries with relatively lower average incomes, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, have had less success in attracting foreign students (Hendarman 2013; Tayag 2013). There are few examples of universities in the least economically developed nations attracting significant numbers of foreign students, and there

are no examples of universities from developing countries attracting large numbers of students from developed countries. It is speculated universities in developing and less-developed economies that lack the national brand image and internal resources to compete with universities from more economically developed nations in attracting students with the financial resources to study abroad.

Thailand would appear to fall somewhere in between the more economically developed nations of Asia and the less economically developed nations in attracting foreign students to its universities. In contrast to worldwide trends, Thailand has actually seen a decline in university enrolment, and the Asian Institute of Technology, while not officially a Thai university but was created to increase the internationalization of HE in Thailand, has in recent years seen a steady decline in the number of students studying in its international programs (Sinlarat 2013).

In comparison to Malaysia, Thailand has put less emphasis on attracting foreign students. In 2010, there were only slightly more than 20,000 foreign students in Thailand. Within the international university programs in the country, using English as the language of instruction, around 85 % of all students were Thai. The majority of international university programs in the country are in business and management fields and the government's focus in these programs has been on developing language and business skills of Thai students to increase the competitiveness of the Thai workforce (Lavankura 2013). The number of foreign students in these programs has been fairly steady over recent years with the overwhelming majority of foreign students coming from within the Asia-Pacific region, with China, Myanmar, and Laos being the top three countries sending students to study in Thailand (Kruanak and Ruangkanjanases 2014; Ngamkamollert and Ruangkanjanases 2015). Buchanan (2013: 12) opined, "While Thai students leave in droves for foreign education, interest is virtually nonexistent for inbound international students."

CASE STUDY OF NUIC

Naresuan University

Naresuan University (NU) is one of the leading Thai universities outside of Bangkok. The university is situated in the heart of Thailand in Phitsanulok, a major business center and logistical hub in the lower-northern region

of Thailand. The university is named after King Naresuan the Great and is home to 22 faculties, colleges, and a demonstration school. NU plays host to almost 20,000 students who come from nearly all 77 provinces in Thailand and well over 20 foreign countries. NU also employs over 1400 teaching staff members.

Naresuan University International College

As an extension of NU, Naresuan University International College (NUIC) was launched on January 13, 2001, with a vision of enriching and enhancing the effectiveness and reputation of NU as a center of international education. At present, NUIC has four international programs for undergraduates, tourism, human resource management, English for business communication and international business management. These programs not only have over 450 students currently enrolled with Thai students being the majority but also have a group of international students from a variety of countries, although most of international students at NUIC come from Bhutan on scholarships provided by the Thai government.

Up until the present, NUIC has used a very limited marketing strategy in attempts to attract foreign students. The university has primarily relied on government-to-government programs and scholarships. However as acquiring government funding becomes more difficult and competitive (Sinlarat 2013), the college is exploring new options to attract an increasing number of paying foreign students.

The research presented is exploratory in nature and used a case study approach which included using in-depth interviews and a Likert-scale survey of 40 international students, which covered nearly all foreign students at NUIC. The participants include 22 women and 18 men, with 27 students coming from Bhutan, 8 from the People's Republic of China, 2 each from Cambodia and Myanmar, and 1 from Gambia.

SURVEY RESULTS

We asked students if they chose to study in Thailand because of its educational reputation as well as asking if other students from their home country chose to study in Western countries because of educational reputation.

The results indicate the choice to study in Thailand was not primarily driven by a desire to study in a country with a strong educational reputation.

We also asked students to compare the reputation of educational programs in Thailand as well as reputation of educational programs in Western countries, in comparison with the home country of the respondents.

The results presented in Table 7.1 show students do not consider the reputation of education in Thailand to be higher than the reputation of the home study of the students, but the students do consider the educational reputation of Western countries to be significantly stronger than the educational reputation of both their countries of origin and Thailand.

In addition, we wanted to measure the students' perceptions of enhanced career prospects from studying abroad (Table 7.2).

Aligned with the results about educational reputation, students perceived the career prospects of students studying in the West as being superior to the prospects of students who study in Thailand.

Cost

Another factor we wanted to consider was the impact of cost on the decision to study in Thailand (Fig. 7.1).

Table 7.1 Perception of educational reputation

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
I chose to study in Thailand because of its educational reputation	1	8	21	7	3
Some individuals from my home country choose to study in a Western country (e.g. UK) because of its educational reputation.	24	13	3	0	0
The educational reputation of Thailand is stronger than the educational reputation of my home country	2	9	19	9	1
The educational reputation of Western countries (e.g. UK) is stronger than the educational reputation of my home country	23	11	6	0	0

Table 7.2 Perception of career prospects for international students

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Studying in Thailand will enhance my career prospects	3	20	17	0	0
Studying in a Western country (e.g. UK) will enhance the career prospects of individuals from my country who study there	20	16	4	0	0

**Fig. 7.1** The cost of studying in Thailand, is it important?

From the perspective of the students, costs were not considered as important as anticipated, although the results might have been influenced by the fact that the majority of the foreign students at the university are attending on scholarships.

Culture and Religion

Another factor examined was the influence of culture and the similarity of religious environments between Thailand and the home countries of the majority of foreign students at the university (Figs. 7.2 and 7.3).

Religious and cultural factors did not appear to be important drivers of the decision to study in Thailand for the majority of respondents.

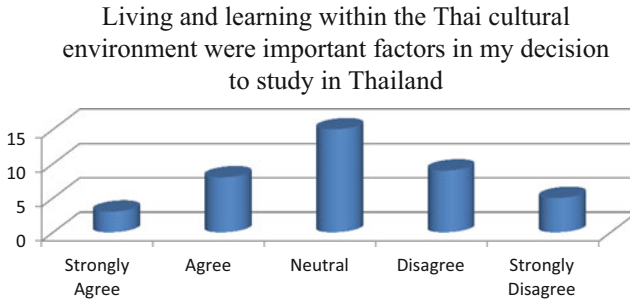


Fig. 7.2 How important is Thai Culture for choosing to study?

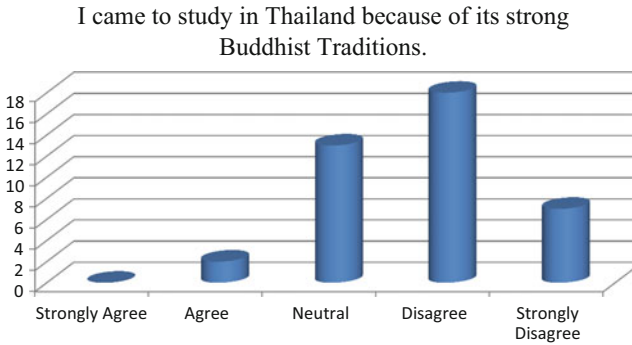


Fig. 7.3 Is the Thai Buddhist Tradition important for attracting foreign students?

International Experience

As can be seen in Fig. 7.4, the opportunity to live abroad and gain international experience was considered important by many of the students.

Satisfaction

Finally, we wanted to examine the level of satisfaction of the students with their choice and experience in studying in Thailand.

These results presented in Table 7.3 suggest the university has some room for improvement in satisfying the needs of foreign students.

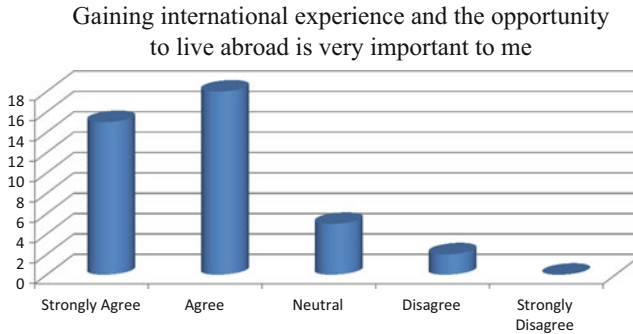


Fig. 7.4 Is the opportunity to experience living “abroad” an important factor for potential students?

Table 7.3 Are International students surveyed happy with their choice of studying in Thailand?

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
I am happy with my decision to study in Thailand	2	12	18	5	3
I would recommend studying in Thailand to non-Thai students	2	9	15	8	6

DISCUSSION

The results showing students perceived the quality of education in Thailand to be lower than the perception of the quality of education in Western countries are not surprising considering other studies have also shown a preference of Asian students, especially those from developing economies, for studying in Western universities (e.g. Cheung et al. 2010, 2011). It would appear universities from Thailand will have a difficult time competing on the general perception of quality, at least with students who are business majors, with universities from more economically developed countries, and it is likely this challenge will be shared by other universities located in other developing economies.

In a related result, it was seen students did not perceive earning a degree in Thailand as having as positive of an impact on career prospects as does

earning a degree in a Western university. However, it needs to be kept in mind, the students surveyed in this study were all majoring in business-related fields. There might be a natural inclination to perceive business education in more economically successful locations to be of higher quality, which would increase career prospects in comparison to business education in less economically developed environments. However, students studying in other fields, for example, Buddhist Studies, might have different perceptions of both the quality and career prospects of education in Thailand.

The attraction of Thai culture and living in a country where the majority of people follow the Theravada Buddhist religion did not appear to be a significant factor in these students selecting to come to Thailand despite the fact that the majority of the students come from countries where Buddhism is also widely practiced. This result is consistent with the findings of Arar and Haj-Yehia (2013) who found cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities were not the most important factors in the decisions of Palestinian students to study in nearby Jordan. On the other hand, our findings are not consistent with the results of Zeeshan et al. (2013) who found religious and cultural factors were important drivers for students from the Middle East and Indonesia to choose to study in Malaysia. Further investigation of the influence of religious and cultural factors on decisions of foreign students in developing economies is encouraged.

However, cost was considered moderately important in influencing students to study in Thailand. Costs have also been found to influence the decisions of students to study in other developing economies (Arar and Haj-Yehia 2013; Ngamkamollert and Ruangkanjanases 2015; Zeeshan et al. 2013). While some of the participants in the survey might have preferred to have studied in Western universities, the tuition and living costs, as well as the higher academic standards and language requirements, might have made this option out of reach. Students might have settled for what they could realistically obtain as opposed to what they ideally preferred.

Another factor which the students felt important was the opportunity to live abroad and gain international experience. This result suggests a focus in marketing campaigns on the intangible benefit of the international experience which students gain from living and studying in Thailand or other developing economy might be more effective than trying to compete solely on the perception of the quality of the education.

Finally, the results showed only moderate satisfaction with the educational experience in Thailand for the foreign students which was consistent

with other measures of foreign student satisfaction in Thailand (Kruanak and Ruangkanjanases 2014; Ngamkamollert and Ruangkanjanases 2015). During interviews, many of the foreign students felt the international program was primarily designed and operated to meet the needs of the Thai students studying in the program while the needs of foreign students were of secondary importance. These comments were consistent with opinions expressed by others that international programs in Thailand have been mostly focused on increasing language and business skills of local students as opposed trying to attract a large number of foreign students (Buchanan 2013; Lavankura 2013). These results suggest successful marketing of international education to foreign students in Thailand will most likely require a more international focus at both the national and university levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THAI UNIVERSITIES

International Marketing

We provide two recommendations under the heading of international marketing. The first is to increase attention and efforts in attracting foreign students. Asaad et al. (2013) made the case that successfully responding to the complex nature of international education requires gathering, analyzing, and acting upon current information. Also there is some support for the concept, marketing efforts using similar principles to those found in business organizations can have a positive impact on brand image and achieving organizational marketing objectives (Goi et al. 2014; Idris and Whitfield 2014). Therefore, it is recommended universities in Thailand actively engage at the operational and tactical levels in international marketing research and other activities to better understand and respond to the needs and motivations of the international students the universities wish to recruit.

A second marketing recommendation would be for Thai universities to help facilitate access to education on a global scale. Thai HE institutions and the Thai government are encouraged to seek educational partners from around the world. Through educational associations with universities from around the world, Thai universities could provide opportunities for more international educational experiences through exchange and collaboration programs, thereby inviting cross-cultural learning and the sharing of knowledge and the inevitable promotion of Thailand as a global

educational player. Many universities in Thailand currently have exchange programs and other collaborative partnerships; however, these programs and partnerships are often more symbolic than active. Increasing focus on making these programs and partnerships more effective would be expected to have a positive effect on increasing the international competitiveness of local universities and increasing the enrolment of foreign students.

Competitive Advantages

While compared to English-speaking countries with developed economies, Thailand would not at first glance appear to possess many substantial competitive advantages within the global HE market. Yet, the country's geographical location in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia and its relatively high economic development, in comparison to neighboring countries, and lower costs of living compared to more developed economies, seem to make it an attractive alternative for students from neighboring countries such as China, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia who are seeking international educational opportunities. Thai universities might be able to use some of their perceived disadvantages as advantages when appealing to specific segments of the international market.

Primarily due to educational conditions in many of the least and less-developed economies, there are few students from these regions who have the academic backgrounds or language skills at the start of their university studies to successfully study in world-class universities in developed economies. Yet to exclude these students from engaging in international education and having the opportunities associated with an international education due to their financial and educational backgrounds may be neither necessary nor desirable. Arar and Haj-Yehia (2013) pointed out Jordanian universities used lenient acceptance policies, relatively low costs, and offered a better chance to graduate than found in universities in more developed economies, and these strategies have worked to attract international students and provide new opportunities for these students from neighboring areas, especially students from Palestine where politics, poverty, and a weak primary educational system have reduced opportunities. Thai universities might be able to use a similar strategy to take advantage of their geographical location and level of economic development. While the use of lenient acceptance policies might initially seem unsustainable and counter-intuitive, many students from the least developed economies in Southeast Asia have not had the opportunity to develop the academic and

English language skills expected to begin a high-level academic program in a developed economy. The international programs at Thai universities might be able to use some of their competitive “advantages,” which come from originating in a developing economy, to provide alternatives for students who may not have the financial resources, nor have the opportunity to study in the types of schools which could provide preparation for the higher levels of HE found in developed economies. Anecdotal evidence and experience suggest students from neighboring and less-developed countries are able to meet the standards found in the international programs in Thailand and more often than not outperform the Thai students in the programs.

Another competitive advantage Thai universities may have is being located in a country which attracts many tourists and visitors due to the warm weather, beaches, friendly people, and fascinating culture and history. Some students are likely to make a choice to attend university in Thailand due to being attracted to living in Thailand as opposed to being attracted to studying in Thailand. In these situations, the country’s brand image might be a more powerful message to entice students than the images of the individual universities.

Positioning and Segmentation

Positioning and segmentation are of vital importance in marketing efforts. In international business educational programs, it seems unlikely for most universities in Thailand to compete directly for students in the best prepared and wealthiest segments of the international market against universities from more developed economies. Instead, our main positioning recommendation is for most Thai universities to use more of a low-cost leadership strategy and position their programs as practical and obtainable alternatives for students from developing or less-developed economies seeking international education and experience, but who don’t have the financial resources or academic credentials to attend a university in a developed economy. This positioning strategy can benefit both Thai universities in their internationalization strategies and also provide international education and experience for categories of students who have previously been excluded from international education opportunities due to financial constraints and a previous lack of high-quality educational opportunities needed to prepare for studying in a university in a developed economy.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2012: 717) pointed out that alongside having a strong reputation and financial strength, competitive advantages

for universities also can come from having, “A broad range of carefully differentiated programs.” Currently, the programs offered by NUIC, and most other international programs in Thailand, are pretty standard and do not stand out from the crowd. Differentiation, or focused differentiation, strategies have already proven successful in non-traditional education/training in Thailand as Thai boxing training centers and cooking schools teaching the preparation of traditional Thai food are extremely popular and attract many foreign students (Singsomboon 2014). Therefore, our second positioning recommendation is leverage the competitive advantage of the positive image of the country to create unique and focused programs, which rely on specific strengths and competitive advantages of the country. For example, instead of a generic degree in management, which is similar to a management degree in every country, maybe it would make sense to take advantage of Thailand’s geographic position in the center of mainland Southeast Asia and offer a degree in ASEAN management. Other possibilities to leverage some of the countries’ competitive advantages might be to offer programs in fields such as international development, Asian studies or Buddhist studies. It is highly unlikely for a university in a developing economy to become the first choice for international students in general subjects; however, Thailand has shown it can be a world leader in very specific areas. Therefore, it might be possible for Thai universities to become leaders in niches in which the country already has competitive advantages.

Branding

A regional university in Thailand, like NU, has very little independent brand image internationally, instead outside the borders of the country it is known primarily as a Thai university. From a review of the literature, it seems likely a similar situation would be found with the vast majority of universities located in developing economies which are attempting to attract international students. During interviews with the international students at NUIC, most students reported they had never heard of NU prior to be offered a scholarship to attend.

Therefore, our branding recommendation is for the government to put more effort into branding the nation as an attractive location for HE, while individual universities focus on creating specific programs which will be attractive to students who are already considering studying in Thailand.

Language

Despite making English a compulsory subject in primary school and possessing a strong tourism industry, the level of English language proficiency, and overall level of education, in Thailand is below the levels found in many neighboring countries (UNDP 2014). As the Thai language is not widely spoken internationally, and the slow economic growth in the country is limiting the demand for foreign speakers of Thai, it is likely Thai universities will have to continue to rely on programs taught in English to further internationalize their programs. But the shortage of students and faculty who are fluent English speakers presents some challenges. It is suggested the government increases its focus on teaching English in primary schools, and individual universities also focus on providing opportunities for faculty and students to improve their language skills.

CONCLUSION

While these recommendations are specifically targeted toward Thai universities, some of the principles might also be useful for universities from other developing economies. Due to language, level of economic development, national image and other factors, marketing of international HE in Thailand, or other developing economy, is expected to be significantly different from the strategies and tactics employed in universities coming from more economically developed countries where the native language is the international lingua franca, English. While there are challenges, through careful positioning and use of focused strategies which leverage existing national or regional strengths, while not trying to compete directly with universities from developed economies, Thai universities as well as other universities from other developing economies may be able to find niches in which to survive and even thrive in the increasingly hyper-competitive world of international education.

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