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Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education in Asia in the Era of Globalization: Case of Thailand

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Abstract

Much has been written about globalization and its effects, some of the literature suggesting that this is a recent phenomenon. It is the enhanced connectivity of the world, due primarily to the advent of the Internet, that is having a profound effect on our daily lives and the way in which we view higher education.

Higher education can be involved globally at both the education level and the research level, however, these require a slightly different approach. Internationalization of education on campus is a means towards globalization, whereas research without borders requires international collaboration and thinking beyond national needs. Pure education institutes may be less affected by globalization, whereas institutes with a strong research focus must actively engage it.

Globalization is mostly viewed from the perspective of economics, such as international trade and the commercialization of education. However, there are also strong cultural implications that need to be considered when deciding how we develop our response to globalization.

Thailand is currently considering the likely effects on higher education when the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) becomes a fully-fledged community in 2015. While regional in nature, this will be globalization at another level and responses here will have effects far beyond the region itself. Thinking national, acting global is no longer enough.

Background

Globalization has been in practice since the days of the first sailing ship. Higher education in Thailand has already absorbed influences from Europe, America and, more recently, Japan and China [1]. It was well over a century ago that the first Thai students found their way to Europe. For developing countries much of the overseas scholarship was funded by the country providing the education. Currently, newly emerging economies such as Thailand have to fund the bulk of this themselves.

The realization of globalization is more recent. The foundation for recent globalization is connectivity, now available in real time via the Internet. This has led to a shift, at various levels and to various degrees, from industrial-based economies to knowledge-based, largely driven by science and technology [2]. It is a national desire for many countries in Asia to achieve a knowledge-based economy and the only way to achieve this is to be a proactive participant in globalization. As a result, higher education institutes, particularly research universities, have evolved from local clientele, to meeting national needs, to becoming agents for globalization [3, 4].

What does globalization mean for higher education in Asia? While the debate continues as to whether we are victims or agents [3, 5], what should be apparent is that globalization cannot be avoided and should be viewed in a positive light, as an opportunity for higher education institutions. The reason for this is simply that it is inevitable. Connectivity cannot be prevented and houses of learning cannot progress in isolation. Students have traditionally been catalysts for change and students cannot be prevented from embracing globalization, which they are clearly doing. Globalization and its effects require careful examination to determine and maximize potential benefits and to minimize potential detrimental effects. Some developing country academics claim that globalization will only cause a widening of the gap between the haves and the have-nots [5]. This is very much open to debate. What is clear, however, is that these discrepancies in society are a national problem and existed long before the advent of recent globalization. While some may argue that globalization will aggravate these discrepancies, they remain a problem for nations to resolve.

Education

Teaching institutions are generally less affected by globalization [6]. Nonetheless, the increasing adoption of IT enables a radical change in the way teaching is conducted and opens the door to seemingly limitless knowledge. Education also empowers the quest for knowledge through the teaching of universal language.

It is also at the teaching level that internationalization of universities mostly occurs. This is through hiring of foreign staff, attracting foreign students or the various international

exchange programs [7, 8], as well as the increasing introduction of international courses. Universities that offer both the international education experience, have a strong cultural identity and are also able to offer research, are most likely to be attractive for foreign students and staff.

International programs at Thai universities are a growth industry. In 2006 there were 844 such programs offered and annual growth is estimated at approximately 30%. In the period 2004 – 2008, the number of foreign students increased by 364%, reaching a total of over 16,000. The majority of these are from Asia. Thailand has an affiliation with Yunnan Province in China, due to shared boundaries, culture, etc. and this is reflected in the number of students from that area.

It would be reasonable to say that education has become commercial and that, in addition to selling locally and regionally, universities also hope to sell globally. India and its comparative advantage in IT is perhaps a good example of this. Universities that have a particular niche market or are able to offer innovative programs not available elsewhere have an advantage in attracting foreign students. Building on strong ties with industry, the KMUTT Practice School concept is one good example of this approach.

Education is also the key to producing global citizens.

Research

Research has always lent itself well to globalization. Traditionally, research has had no borders. Publishing results invites opinion from international peers and is itself a means of networking globally, knowing who is working on what and where. The use of the World Wide Web for online publishing and the number of publication databases has greatly enhanced this process. The advent of informatics and the multitude of technical databases being developed opens the door to international collaboration.

Conference attendance to present results is another avenue towards being a global researcher and provides the right atmosphere for developing or strengthening networks.

Due to the nature and sheer size of some research efforts, these cannot be effectively undertaken by one institution or country alone. This has led to international research consortia to solve problems of common interest. Thailand is already participating in international research efforts, particularly in the area of genome research.

Thus it is not surprising that it is the research universities who tend to be more actively engaged in international collaboration [3].

Reform and Management

Reform in higher education has been occurring in many Asian countries, particularly East Asia, as globalization begins to have an effect on national policy. Responses have not surprisingly been largely dictated by national needs [6].

Reform of the Thai higher education system came in the form of the National Education Act of 1999, and subsequent acts under this legislation [9]. The major features related to globalization were the granting of autonomy to some institutes and the designation of research universities. King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) was the first institute to become autonomous and is also one of the nine designated research universities. The roadmap for this reform specifically mentions globalization and the increased dependence on technology, especially IT. According to the roadmap this, and the desire for a knowledge-based society, has changed the human resource needs of the nation, requiring education to adapt accordingly.

This major reform of the Thai education sector has resulted in significant changes in the way education and research is managed. With greater autonomy comes greater accountability. This new "managerialism" is a direct consequence of globalization. It is seen as the means to implement reform and achieve recognition through ranking. Standards, accountability and quality assurance are the new higher education tools of the globalized era [10].

For Thailand at least, the responsibility of higher education institutes, even those designated as research universities, to serving communities at the national level is also given emphasis. This includes preservation and enhancement of local culture and the recognition and application of local wisdom. While responding to globalization, the "have-nots" cannot be forgotten and a balance must be sought [11].

Globalization at the Regional Level

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which Thailand is a founding member, aims to achieve full integration in 2015. English is the common language of ASEAN. The implications for higher education in the region are profound. Countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam will have to quickly develop more degree programs in English or "international" courses. The short term solution may be to engage more foreign staff.

However, the major implication for higher education arising from an integrated community will be in the area of common standards. ASEAN has already developed a policy framework for Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) and is exploring benchmarking for both

research and education. While Singapore is preeminent in both areas, Thailand ranks as either second or third in the region [12]. Benchmarking for ASEAN universities will require careful consideration. Due to an emphasis on proprietary work with industry and specific programs to assist marginalized societies, it has been found that the world ranking methods have severe limitations when applied to Thai universities.

The Thai Commission on Higher Education has adopted the QS.com Asian University Ranking system. This gives weight to research quality (60%), teaching quality, based on teacher/student ratio (20%), graduate employment (10%) and internationalization (10%). Due to strong capability in English, universities from Singapore, Malaysia and the Philippines tend to rank better in internationalization.

Will ASEAN be simply bypassed on the globalization highway, being deemed as not relevant? Universities are now standards driven and many in ASEAN would be reluctant to see any lowering of existing standards they have fought to achieve as the price for accommodating universities in the still developing member countries of the group. National education priorities will not change dramatically as a result of integration and already some universities are preparing for a windfall of regional students. Nations may speak regionally, but will continue to service their own interests first. This is natural. In reality it could mean that nations will participate regionally, while at the same time striving to achieve globally.

In the field of research, however, there is good reason for collaboration at the regional level, pooling resources towards solving common problems due to climate, environment, agricultural systems, etc. ASEAN has quite a history in this area, particularly in science and technology. This collaboration was reliant on external funding and it involved individual research groups in each country doing their own work under a common umbrella or theme. Nonetheless, these could be viewed as the first tentative steps towards regional collaboration on research, which in turn could lead to bilateral or trilateral partnerships within the region.

Summary

There is clearly a new dynamic in Asian education with the emergence of the economies of China and India. Based on international publication alone, in many fields Asia is already contributing close to 50%. For Thailand at least, globalization means becoming more engaged with our neighbors as we grow together, while continuing and enhancing the more traditional relationships.

As can be expected, there is a backlash to globalization and, on cultural and religious grounds, resistance is sometimes strong. One author from India describes it as a destabilizing

and distorting influence on indigenous culture, tradition and values [5]. More recently, a conference held in Malaysia called for the rejection of everything Western, including Western science [13]. These are just some of the contentious issues that will have to be faced at the regional level by ASEAN.

It could be argued, however, that culture is a distinct advantage in a globalized world. What is most likely to attract foreign students and staff to universities in Thailand is not the academic standards, but rather the strong culture of the country. Something that cannot be experienced anywhere else. This would apply to many countries in Asia. So too, it is this strong cultural identity that is likely to see the eventual return of nationals seeking study or employment in the global marketplace [14]. Rather than viewing globalization as diminishing culture, properly executed, it could be a force for enhancing it.

How each university in Asia responds to globalization will be different. However, these responses will be largely driven by national agendas [15]. Higher education institutes need to recognize that they are in fact agents for globalization.

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