Studying in one culture whilst working in another

Chitrappa Kundalaputra, Brian Hemmings, and Doug Hill
(Charles Sturt University)

ABSTRACT

In recent years higher education institutions have enrolled a significant number of distance education students from overseas countries. These students need to become immersed in the life of the tertiary institutions and hopefully become enculturated. Culture in this context helps define a set of beliefs about what students do and how they are expected to work. The study which is reported here was an evaluation of joint foreign-Thai doctoral programs in which the students remained working in their own higher education institution in Thailand whilst studying part-time by distance education with an Australian or British university. These students, however, remained immersed in the culture of their own workplace and felt relatively isolated from other students in the study programs. The students also experienced a number of problems in their studies due to uncertainty, which is common with new programs, where there is no transfer of information from one generation of students to the next generation. That is, students were not sure of particular study requirements and lacked appropriate support from various groups such as family and colleagues. The culture of the students’ workplace supported the rejection of new and different programs. As well, the additional time required to work in English was not always appreciated by students or by the staff of the foreign universities. Some of these difficulties were overcome, in part, through study visits to the university and through visits of staff members to work with students for short study blocks in Thailand.

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Background

In recent years the Thai government has endeavoured to increase the number of people with postgraduate qualifications as part of its plan to become a more knowledge-oriented nation. However, it has had difficulty in funding overseas study, particularly since the Asian financial downturn in 1997. For this reason the government has favoured the development of joint Thai-foreign programs in which a local institution is partnered with an overseas institution to deliver a program.

This paper reports on the evaluation of the first year of operation of two new joint programs in education. The programs involved a university from the United Kingdom and an Australian
university working with Rajabhat Institutes (RIs). RIs are similar to the former Australian Colleges of Advanced Education in many ways and are coordinated by the Office of Rajabhat Institutes Council (ORIC). This is a department within the Ministry of Education with responsibility for the overall administration of system-wide concerns for all 36 of Thailand’s regionally-based RIs. RIs are responsible for full-time and in-service teacher training, for the execution of other research programs supported by non-government budget allocations (e.g., UNICEF, UNESCO and other multilateral and bilateral agencies), as well as providing a full range of undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

The Secretary-General has overall responsibility for ORIC, whilst the president of each Rajabhat Institute (RI) is responsible for administering the individual institutions. Although they are fully functioning higher educational institutions offering a full range of degree programs up to doctoral level, RIs differ from most universities. The major difference is that each RI is concerned with local and regional development. The relevant section of the Act is:

Rajabhat Institutes shall be graduate educational institutes for local development with the objective to provide academic and high level vocational education; conduct research as an academic service to the general public; improve, transfer and develop technology; preserve and promote art and culture; produce teachers and elevate the status of teachers.

(ORIC, 1995, p. 2)

The number of first year students in RIs has increased almost twofold from 120,250 students in 1990 to 222,045 students in 1998. Whilst there has been great success at the quantitative level, improvements in graduate quality have been more difficult to obtain. This has been the case for two reasons:

1. budget limitations; and,
2. the lack of experienced and highly qualified permanent teachers especially with doctoral qualifications.

ORIC has plans to increase the number of Rajabhat staff with doctoral qualifications significantly to around 10%. These plans are dependent on the successful development of a range of joint-programs.

The first joint program began in 1996. Others began in November 1998. The process of teaching/learning involves a mixture of delivery methods including hosting overseas instructors in Thailand, sending the students overseas to the participating institution, and using distance learning techniques over the Internet. Research is conducted both in Thailand and overseas but should involve a significant component of relevance to the situation in Thailand.

The consequences of the Asian economic crisis, and the necessary responses to it by the Thai government and local higher education institutions, are that there has been a far greater emphasis on distance learning and on the uses of new educational technologies and methods which can help mitigate the tyrannies of distance and cost.

Foreign universities have various reasons for, and see advantages in, setting up joint programs with RIs. These include the desire:

- to gain experience in working overseas;
- to increase revenue from non-government sources;
- to meet expectations of various stakeholders including government and teaching staff;
- to be seen to be capable of meeting educational needs in a variety of settings and to be internationally competitive thus enhancing the profile of the university;
- to respond to people and situations known to key personnel;
- to attract or retain high calibre staff;
- to act as a basis for developing a regional presence and infrastructure which may create further opportunities;
- to further the spirit of goodwill which arises from assisting in development;
- to provide staff development opportunities for their staff;
- to foster long term relationships;
- to develop their staff members in terms of experience with teaching/learning in other cultures;
- to provide English and research support;
- to develop joint curricula with an international focus;
- to use technology to enhance higher degree study; and,
- to encourage a diverse range of expertise in RIs.

The above-mentioned points have been the subject of evaluation and discussion (e.g., see Currie & Newson, 1998; Kundalaputra, 2001; Saffu, 2000). It appears that the early enthusiasm for joint programs has not always been justified by experience.

At the current time, joint programs have a number of benefits over programs that send RI instructors overseas for long periods of full-time study to obtain masters or doctoral degrees. First, the fact that the training is done primarily in-country provides cost savings. It also allows the skills developed by participants to be transferred more readily than would otherwise be the case. Second, since the actual content of these programs is tailored specifically to the geographical region in which they are located, the programs more readily result in sustainable and transferable skills. Third, because instructors do their study in their home country, there is a greater possibility of a ‘research culture’ evolving in the participating RIs. Ultimately, the aim of the programs is to increase the skill levels of Rajabhat staff so that RIs can develop, teach, and award their own doctoral and masters degrees at an international standard.

The joint-doctoral degree programs represent a new mode of delivery of higher education in the Thai context. However, because there are a number of important differences between the programs in terms of how they are structured and how they are delivered, the effectiveness of this mode of delivery needs to be evaluated taking into account such factors as satisfaction levels of key stakeholders, managerial problems, and strengths and weaknesses of this model when compared to other modes of delivery.

The most appropriate time to begin a study of the joint programs is one year after they commence as the first year is critical in terms of the way that students settle into their study. Such a timeframe allows not only a comparison of ongoing programs but also an opportunity to make adjustments to programs that are expected to commence in the near future. Such comparisons and adjustments are of great importance when the cost of programs is compared to study in Thai universities. Whilst less expensive than full-time study at a foreign university, such programs are considerably more expensive than study at a Thai university.

The two programs selected for this study were the joint-doctoral programs running between the North University in the United Kingdom and North Rajabhat Institute, and the joint program between the South University in Australia and the South Rajabhat Institute. The first program commenced in November 1998 and the second in March 1999.
The framework for the study

Given the role of ORIC it was appropriate that the evaluation adopted a management perspective. The CIPP evaluation model (Stufflebeam et al., 1971) was a useful starting point in planning the investigation. The model includes the following four factors:

- context (economic status, and environmental impact of the program);
- input (the resources such as budget, staff, and participants in the program);
- process (the implementation of the program, and operational elements involving the delivery of the program); and,
- products (the results, including output and outcomes).

From such considerations a customised program evaluation model which suited the purpose of this research was developed. The model is both formative and summative in that its purpose is to provide appropriate feedback to assist in the fine-tuning of existing programs and the formulation of guidelines for further programs. This framework is summarised in Figure 1.

At each stage in the evaluation process the key stakeholders actively participated and interpreted both the context and their experience in that context from their own perspectives. Such a process aimed at capturing the issues and concerns of stakeholders in a way that could inform management about the development of the joint programs.
The development of a joint program involves interaction among the three main systems involved in setting up and operating joint Thai-foreign university programs. The three systems are outlined below:

1. The regulatory/funding system (OCSC & ORIC) in Thailand

This system involves three departments within the Office of Civil Service Commission (OCSC), which is responsible for allocating fellowships for students, civil servants, and the general public. The commission is especially important since it is the commission’s job to determine whether or not degrees like that offered by the joint-doctoral program are certified. The second department is the Bureau of the Budget, which is in charge of budget allocation for all government offices. The third department is the ORIC which is in charge of setting priorities for staff development, arranging appropriate cooperation with overseas universities, and setting guidelines for project budget allocation. ORIC also has direct responsibility for the implementation of all joint-doctoral programs. The inputs and outputs of this system include
• Inputs: project/program, curriculum
• Outputs: advice, the approval of the program

1. RIs

This system includes all people responsible for the program including participants, bosses/work supervisors, associate supervisors, all support including study materials, and student workload. The inputs and outputs are noted below

• Inputs: all support and management
• Outputs: staff development

1. Foreign universities

All activities, supports and people responsible for the joint program are involved in this system, including managers, curriculum designers, lecturers, and principal supervisors. The inputs and outputs are listed below

• Inputs: program and curriculum management
• Outputs: student and program outputs

These three systems must work together as a Thai/foreign joint-doctoral program system to produce quality outcomes. The relationship among the three systems is shown in Figure 2.

The student (S) is located in the area of overlap among the three systems and is influenced by all three systems. Participants in a joint program have to make a cultural transition from the formal traditions of higher education in Thailand to that of the foreign university if they are to succeed. This means that RI participants need to change as they make this cultural journey. Kalantzis and Cope (2000) have discussed studying in a university as a cultural
journey requiring crossing over from one realm of life experience to another. They also point out that there are different transitions to university life among different students, with those whose starting point is closer to the culture of the university having an easier transition than those who are more distant. Therefore, it is likely to be a more difficult journey for those living in their own country and studying at a foreign university by distance education than for those overseas students who travel to a foreign university and are immersed in the culture of the foreign university. The journey is illustrated in Figure 3.

**RIs/participants: what is their experience?**

- Formal learning (accurate transmission of information)
- Outlook - Some certainty
- Workplace (long hours, formal teaching and formal administration)
- Culture/society - Thai society (don’t challenge authority, respect seniority)

**Foreign programs: what is expected?**

- Learning: Self-directed study, critical thinking, active learning, discussion, much time for reading, research and reflection
- Culture/society:
  - Multiple perspectives (pluralist society)
  - Challenge assumptions
  - Varied sources of information - decide what is important/valuable
  - Outlook: Learning to live with uncertainty and ambiguity in everyday life

**Figure 3:** The cultural journey needed to be taken by RI participants in order to succeed in a doctoral degree through a foreign program.

(adapted from Kalantzis & Cope, 2000)

This journey involves a change in the way the person has to think, feel, and talk about education. Such change is difficult and there are many barriers to such change. These barriers are thought to be: certainty of support/funding; clear definition of roles and responsibilities; shared understandings of those roles and expectations; good communication; appropriate access to supervisors; adequate resources; responsive and stable administration; and, quality inputs. These factors can be related to the difficulties students experience in reaching the target of persisting and succeeding in their study. Recently Kember (2000) has claimed that Asian students’ learning has been misunderstood
and that these students are better equipped to make the above journey than previously thought.

The discussion above uses the metaphor of a journey and is consistent with the human ecology model of Bronfenbrenner (1977) and takes account of many of the factors identified in the research literature in the fields of student persistence and attrition and adult education. In the latter field the models of Rubenson (1977) and Cross (1981), which are depicted in Figures 4 and 5, are of particular interest.

**Figure 4:** Rubenson’s (1977) expectancy-valence model

**Figure 5:** Cross’s (1981) chain-of-response model
Foreign universities need to support their students to make the necessary cultural journey by preparing their staff members and helping them to understand the nature of the journey and the things they can do to help students in this journey. The policy makers need to consider how well foreign university programs help RI staff to succeed in their journey.

The Rubenson (1977) model is helpful in that it highlights the critical importance of expectations. Such expectations are derived from individual experience, which is moderated by culture. Expectations change as students journey from one educational culture to another.

The Cross (1981) model is particularly useful in relating expectations to the barriers and opportunities that are encountered during formal education and subsequent decisions. Both models fit well with the more general systems model of human ecology. Collectively, the models depicted above help provide a scaffold for describing and analysing the experience of RI instructors in joint-doctoral programs and help in looking at potential foreign partners for joint programs. The study aimed to help develop a set of guidelines for setting up joint Thai-foreign programs. Such guidelines would consider the following questions:

- Why does the foreign university want to enter into a joint program?
- Are they familiar with Thai education/culture?
- What is the course design for the students?
- Have any barriers been identified in the journey to the foreign university culture?
- How do the partners propose to overcome these barriers? For example, course design and coursework (let students know what is expected and how to go about reading, writing and researching) and give them time to make the journey.

The intent of the research

The ultimate purpose of this research is to improve the joint Thai-foreign doctoral programs that are currently running and those that will be instituted in the future through the provision of a set of guidelines and by establishing appropriate policies.

However, the prime aim of this research is to critically examine the effectiveness and efficiency of two current foreign-Thai doctoral degree programs in terms of program management, cost, input selection, and outputs in their first year of operation.

The anticipated outcomes of this investigation were:

1. a description of the experience of students in joint programs; and,
2. the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the two joint programs and the barriers to student participation and progress.

The study is significant because it extends the body of knowledge relating to the development of management of higher education practice in developing new forms of education, particularly at the doctoral degree level, and the application of this knowledge to practice. The joint programs investigated in this study represent the development of a new form of higher education and the management of education in Thailand. This form of higher education involves the implementation of new teaching methods (e.g., distance education) and the utilisation of new educational technologies. Online support, new organisational arrangements, contemporary approaches to learning, and the use of new technologies all have significant implications for the partnerships among the RIs, ORIC, and foreign universities, as well as the students who participate in this new learning environment.
The study involves examining two joint programs that are engaged in managing change and creating new learning environments and new opportunities for learning. In particular, the study considers the relative strengths and weaknesses and efficiency of two different kinds of program - a PhD program from the UK and a DEd program from Australia.

These two different kinds of program were selected because the structure of the UK program follows that of the traditional PhD with a very small preparatory component and a strong emphasis on individual research which develops theory in a local context. In contrast, the Australian professional doctorate has a significant preparatory coursework component and scaffolded proposal development, and a reduced emphasis on the thesis which is more applied and work-related.

Method

The research methods used have been largely determined by the nature of the programs to be investigated and the number of stakeholders involved. The number of students, teaching staff and supervisors, administrators and policy makers involved is relatively small, which precludes the use of quantitative research techniques. Limited face to face access to some stakeholders meant that some data had to be collected by electronic mail, telephone, and fax. Document analysis was limited by the lack of detailed documentation concerning the operation of the programs. At the time the research was conducted, both programs were in their formative stages.

While it was possible to use questionnaires to gain baseline data it was more appropriate to gather in-depth data using other techniques such as interviews and focus groups. The total number of students in each program was less than or equal to 30 and thus this investigation has a strong qualitative emphasis. However, the nature of the research questions and the conceptual frameworks adopted for the study demonstrated that an eclectic approach was appropriate. The main outcome of the evaluation was to identify the critical features of the programs. Each student provides a case to be examined. If the cases of more successful students are compared with those involving less successful students it is possible to identify critical factors and features.

Results

As a result of analyses of the data obtained through interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions, it was possible to describe the experience of students in the first year of these two joint programs. This experience varied greatly between programs and among students enrolled in those programs. In general the framework developed for this study was found to be useful in describing, analysing, and predicting that experience. The more specific findings will now be addressed. These are listed below.

1. Many barriers to student participation and progress in joint-doctoral programs were identified. These barriers included:

   • lack of ‘course fit’ for students;
   • heavy workload;
   • insufficient study per week;
   • inadequate library access;
   • lack of regular contact with supervisors;
   • failure to adapt to the new learning culture;
   • inadequate research experience;
• poor IT skills or access;
• negative attitude to the program and/or workplace;
• inability to express ideas in written academic English;
• uncertainty about extension of government scholarships; and,
• lack of support from significant others.

While the above list separates the barriers to student participation, such barriers were seldom experienced in isolation as the quote below, from a staff member of South University, illustrates.

… one of the weaknesses that needs to be considered is that of communication. Frustration is experienced both by staff and students trying to effectively communicate by email, or post to and from our countries. In Thai culture it is impolite to challenge and demand attention from one's teacher. In Australian culture the opposite is expected. We have learnt over the years to keep encouraging active communication between us and our students. The building of a collegial relationship between teacher and student is a step-by-step process based on trust. In Thai culture the traditional very formal relationship between teacher and student is currently shifting and changing to a more Western style of teacher/student interaction. (Kundalaputra, 2001, p. 110)

1. Nine features of joint programs were identified that lead to successful student participation and progress. These features were:

• appropriate induction and explanation of course requirements and support available;
• detailed contracts between the RI and the foreign university;
• agreement on financial arrangements between parties prior to program commencement;
• reduction in workload to allow participants sufficient study time;
• adequate English proficiency of students;
• sufficient time for students and host university staff members to work together;
• understanding of Thai culture by foreign staff;
• good communication among all parties; and,
• suitable arrangements for monitoring and evaluation.

2. The two doctoral programs were very different and had very different strengths and weaknesses.

The strengths of Program 1 (PhD) were:

• there was an opportunity to give individual students a chance to upgrade their knowledge and research capability in an area of their choice;
• the quality of intellectual and cultural exchange between Thai students and foreign university staff members;
• students were able to study while working;
• the visit to the host university gave students a good opportunity to access resources and clarify their research work with supervisors;
• participants were afforded the opportunity to translate their learning from the program into their own teaching/workplace and address the needs of communities and RIs;
• the development of cooperation between institutes and a well-regarded university;
• students had to develop independence and self-direction; and,
• the PhD had a high status.
The strengths of Program 2 (DEd) were:

- the high quality of instruction from the lecturing staff;
- it allowed students to study while working;
- the frequent visits from South University staff to monitor students’ progress and solve problems;
- South University staff working with students have a good understanding of Thailand;
- ORIC and the Thai institutes jointly provided strong infrastructure support for visiting staff;
- the development of strong cooperation between institutes and a well-regarded university;
- the quality of feedback to students;
- the low attrition rate in year one of the program; and,
- the cost of program was fixed.

The weaknesses of Program 1 were:

- poor communication between staff and students;
- lack of clarity about the program and arrangements for the program;
- high attrition rate in the first year;
- lack of continuity in staff administering the program;
- extension of the time needed by students to complete the program; and,
- the program cost was variable.

The weaknesses of Program 2 were:

- there was no progress toward developing the thesis proposal in year one;
- there were some problems in administering the program;
- contractual arrangements were not fully documented;
- there was some confusion about requirements for students early in the first year;
- there was a need to help students experiencing difficulties with academic English;
- there were high English language entrance requirement (IELTS = 7); and,
- lack of access to appropriate resources.

A common theme emerging from the data was an underlying feeling of uncertainty on the part of various stakeholders. This uncertainty made it difficult for the programs to run smoothly in the first year, especially for students. There was uncertainty about:

- how good these joint programs were likely to be because they are new to the Thai educational system, especially among senior administrators and policy makers;
• management because of a lack of experience in this type of program as cooperative working with overseas universities had not occurred previously and those responsible for managing the program had to work out new processes;
• ongoing scholarship funding for students;
• what was required in the new program and how long and hard students would have to study; and,
• issues relating to information technology, particularly access and skill levels.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the cultural journey that Thai students in two joint-doctoral programs had to make in the first year of their respective programs and the changes they had to make. The process of change involved modifying one’s expectations to fit with the new experience. This can be a slow and painful process. For example, some of the tensions experienced by students in the joint-doctoral programs, which are depicted in the figure below, proved to be critical and difficult to resolve as many of the component parts of the tensions were outside the immediate control of students. The issue of job demands placed on the students by the RIs is probably the most important issue to be addressed by senior institute administrators and policy makers. Students in RIs should probably not have more than half a full-time workload as most doctoral programs for part-time students make the assumption that students are devoting half the time of full-time students to the program. This recommendation is conservative, as the job demands issue is only one factor to be considered as portrayed in Figure 6.

![Figure 6: Tensions experienced by students in joint-doctoral programs](image-url)
References


