



Internationalisation of Higher Education in Thailand and the Philippines: Shifting Contexts and Social Impacts

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Abstract

This research aims to examine how globalisation is shaping the internationalisation of higher education (IHE) in Thailand and the Philippines, with a focus on the commercialisation of International Student Mobility (ISM). Specifically, this study endeavours to understand changing trends and narratives of ISM in the context of Thailand and the Philippines, identify key trends and challenges of ISM and their evolving impact on the social environment as perceived by institutions, and provide recommendations for the higher education sector to address ISM threats and leverage the changing IHE context. The study employs the lenses of globalisation and neoliberalism in its analysis of the rise and ramifications of commercialisation in the Thai and Philippine international education sector. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on publicly funded universities in Thailand and in the Philippines that have been running ISM programmes for the last ten to twenty years and are situated in central metropolitan cities. Findings reveal that the increased commercialisation at institutions has resulted in changing trends, narratives, and challenges around quality, access, and management of ISM, as well as its impact on students, the academic community, and, more broadly, the public.

Keywords

International student mobility, Internationalisation of Higher Education, Commercialisation of Education, Thailand, Philippines

Introduction

Globalisation has accelerated commercialisation and privatisation in higher education (HE). The era of economic and information globalisation has increased public demand for university degrees that translate into employment. As a result, universities are driven to shift from a traditional education model to a commercial one, adopting more internationalised curricula to attract international students and increase revenue opportunities. The economic benefits of internationalising the student body, however, have their downside, as this implies investments and costs related to institutional and student support services (Ward, 2001). With profit as a driver, the shift to commercialised higher education, in turn, has imposed economic and social burdens on the public and on the universities themselves.

For students, a higher education qualification is seen as economic security, a guaranteed path to a better standard of living, even more so if they acquire international education qualifications. In the last few decades, the commercial market for HE globally has expanded due to decreasing government support. International education opportunities, whether studying abroad or taking international programmes locally, have become largely accessible only to the wealthy and upper-class, who possess the means to bear the burden of international tuition fees. Self-funded study allows students greater freedom of choice, flexibility, and commitment, while state-funded scholars are tied to strict timelines, penalties, competitive pressure, and return obligations after their studies. Commercialisation has significant benefits, yet while it offers opportunities, it also imposes challenges and exposes weaknesses within HE systems. Nevertheless, due to globalisation, the HE sector will continue to promote internationalisation to maintain competitiveness (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The commercial and international trade of education is what Altbach (2002) refers to as a revolution in education. Skills sets that were once valued for the good of society are increasingly seen as commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace by multinational companies and academic institutions that have turned themselves into commercial businesses (Altbach, 2002).

The internationalisation of higher education (IHE) is defined by Knight (2003) as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education (p.2). It is a process of integrating the “global knowledge economy” (Hawawini, 2016). Two key elements of IHE are the mobility of academics and students, and reforms in the curriculum (Alex, 2021). This research focuses on international student mobility (ISM) as an internationalisation activity, which generally refers to students enrolled in academic institutions across national borders for part or all of their education. An internationally mobile student is “an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where

the destination country is different from his or her country of origin” (UNESCO, 2015). The majority of internationally mobile students are self-funded, while a smaller percentage are sponsored or funded by governments and institutions (Snow, 2021). This holds true in ASEAN countries, where economic growth has led to a rising middle class that sends students overseas for study, making the region a significant source of outbound student mobility (Li et al., 2025). Outbound ISM from ASEAN countries has been on a steady increase in recent years (Miichi & Ashida, 2022).

While the number of students from Asia and the Pacific studying abroad has continued to increase since the start of the 21st century, there has been a significant shift in the flow and exchange of students within the region, aided by the development of several education hubs. From 2013 to 2018, inbound and outbound student mobility within ASEAN increased, with less than 10% of mobility in 2018 occurring between member states. More than 80% of students studied in Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia, with the latter accounting for 50% (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). In 2022, over 350,000 students from Southeast Asia were studying overseas, making it the third-largest region globally for outbound ISM after China and India (Acumen, 2024). In Thailand, international students generated 2.6 billion baht in market value in 2020, driving the Thai government to position the country as a regional education hub, primarily to reduce the number of local students studying abroad and to increase revenue from foreign students (Chemsripong, 2019). On the other hand, the Philippines’ ISM programmes are supported by complementing legislation: Republic Act 10650, which expands access to HE through open and distance learning (ODL), and Republic Act 11448, which allows foreign HEIs to offer educational services and collaborate with local HEIs in the Philippines (Bombita & Decolen, 2020). These legislations highlight ISM and cross-border learning as key components of the Philippines’ domestic capacity agenda. The varying national drivers have shaped the student mobility landscape in Thailand and the Philippines differently, as the HE sector has evolved over the years, with distinct nuances brought on by changing socio-demographic and economic contexts.

Thailand and the Philippines provide an insightful case study. First, both are member states of ASEAN and are bound by ASEAN’s collective aspiration to harmonise HE and support the development of a regional ASEAN identity. Yet, the two countries have distinct local contexts that naturally influence their strategies and have thus shaped their respective IHE landscapes differently. Second, the two countries’ ISM programmes are under-researched and under-represented study destinations compared with more commonly studied samples from Malaysia, Singapore, and non-ASEAN countries such as China and South Korea (Pham, 2022). Lastly, student mobility is seen as a critical strategy to support regional HE integration; yet, there is minimal literature providing perspectives from universities, actors who have been directly managing ISM

and engaging with these mobile students. Drawing on the perspectives of university actors, this study endeavors to understand the changing trends, narratives, and continuing challenges in the internationalisation of higher education, particularly in ISM, in Thailand and the Philippines over the last two decades.

Literature Review

ISM and Internationalisation: Push and Pull Factors

ISM is a dimension of internationalisation that has featured most prominently in the literature, and the growth of internationalisation tends to be measured through numbers of international mobile students (Teichler, 2017). The prominence of ISM within the varied domains of internationalisation is most reflected in Western literature that covers the ERASMUS Programme and underscores short-term student mobility as the single most important aim of the Bologna reform process. ERASMUS is a perfect example of a government policy-driven internationalisation agenda, and the extant literature has discussed the scheme along with its social and economic benefits both to the students and to the countries involved, as well as the programme's challenges and opportunities including debates around the inclusivity or non-inclusivity of the programme.

Employability skills developed through mobility experience are another aspect of ISM that is extensively covered in the literature. Siemers (2016) pointed to the concentration of quantitative studies on intercultural communication skills as a result of mobility, as well as the development of project management and decision-making skills, self-awareness, and personal independence. Along with the increasing push in higher education institutions to boost the number of international students comes growing recognition among students of the opportunities that arise from mobility. According to Knight (2012), short-term mobility programmes provide mobility experience to students who cannot afford or do not have time to study abroad full-time. The push and pull factors of ISM, as well as the locational choices of international study, are key themes in the ISM literature. Other than employability and labour market opportunities, Cabegin (2015) cited push factors such as the lack of internationally reputable institutions in the home country, intercultural, socio-economic, and political ties, and economic stability of the country of origin. Pull factors tackled in ISM research include the presence of institutions with strong international visibility and prestige, the high marketability of overseas education, the size of the economy, favourable immigration policies, active international student recruitment strategies, costs of living and studying, availability of financial support in the host country, strong international collaboration and research partnerships between host and origin countries, the availability of information about the host country, good governance and political stability, and the presence of social networks in the host country. Literature on ISM

from the students' perspective focuses on the benefits of international education. Aggarwal and Wu (2023) highlight intercultural competencies, global perspectives, exposure to highly diverse campuses, and immersive experiential learning, while Zayim-Kurtay et al. (2025) emphasise the impact of the disruption era on international education, including the shift to digitalised learning, which enables students to embrace and navigate digital innovations.

Literature on ISM, particularly in Thailand and the Philippines, confirms these push and pull factors. Snodin (2019), in her study of international students' reasons, perceptions, and experiences of studying in Thailand, identified scholarship opportunities, word-of-mouth referrals, and geographical and cultural proximity to the country of origin as pull factors. Bombita and Dicolen (2020) highlighted accessibility regulations (visa, residence permit, etc.), culture shock, and limited funding as push factors for Philippine universities in facilitating student mobility programmes. In a comparative study of student mobility programmes in ASEAN conducted by Hou et al. (2017), the authors identified common challenges at the regional and national levels, such as national regulations, coordination among ISM participants, and implementation of credit transfer.

Commercialisation of ISM

Global student mobility is a huge business enterprise. From 2021-2022 international students contributed USD 33.8 billion to the US economy and supported over 335,000 jobs, according to a report by the Association of International Educators (Babatunde & Myklebust, 2023). In the same academic year, the intake of international students contributed £41.9 billion to the UK economy (Universities UK, 2022) and AUD 22.5 billion to the Australian economy (Erudera News, 2023). According to UNESCO (2013), students studying abroad exponentially increased from 1.3 million in 1990 to 4.3 million in 2011 and the traditional study destination has been towards these three English-speaking countries. The motivations for the recruitment of international students varies from country to country, and from university to university, but clearly, commerce is a key factor. For Australia, IHE initiatives such as enrolling foreign students and establishing branch campuses serve as income streams. Similarly, in the UK and the US, international students are viewed as a source of income (Altbach & Reisberg, 2013), with foreign students charged higher tuition fees than their local counterparts.

Government policy is a key driver in this upward trend of international student enrolment as increasing access to higher education is linked to the agenda of creating competitive knowledge-based economies (Jessop, 2008). Developing talent means generating new knowledge and innovation, which subsequently lead to increased national wealth. For Thailand, IHE is a way to attract new talent, especially given the country's ageing population. In 2017, the Thai government invoked constitutional powers to aggressively promote high-potential foreign universities to open

branches in Thailand (Seneviratne, 2018). The Philippines, on the other hand, articulates in its IHE agenda the promotion of inter-cultural cooperation, exchanges, and studies abroad. The commercialisation of ISM has always been part of the country's trade and services agreement framework; however, there have been no strong signals of a full open-door policy for cross border higher education provision (Tayag, 2013) until the enactment of the Transnational Higher Education law in 2019 in the Philippines. The law encourages the country to open its HE sector to more foreign university partnerships and to offer internationally recognised degrees to Filipinos (Ilieva, Postrado and Peak, 2021). However, government pronouncements prioritising IHE do not necessarily come with funding. Levy (2010) indicates that governments in Southeast Asia desire expanded enrolments but are unable or unwilling to bear the burden of financial support.

The Price of ISM Commercialisation

Literature on IHE and ISM leaves no doubt regarding the economic benefits of the commercialisation of IHE. ISM allows high-skilled immigrants to come to developed countries (Suter & Jandl, 2006), and this has generally positive effects on the economies of host countries (Cao, 1996). ISM affects HE policies on the medium of instruction, quality assurance, and tuition fees (DeVoretz, 2006). At universities, more funds mean more advanced equipment and better learning provisions, resulting in the creation and advancement of talent. However, debates persist over whether the threat of commercialisation outweighs its advantages. Gao (2021) claims that the impact of commercialised IHE, in general, far outweighs its benefits, specifically in terms of the academic and social environments. Furthermore, Gao (2021), stresses that the negative impacts are evident in teaching quality, academic values, and students' social and financial burdens. The commercialisation of IHE over the years has resulted in increased tuition fees, posing heavy financial pressure on students and their families. Gao (2021) aligns with the argument of Bok (2007) that the profit motive dilutes academic standards and reputation. University entrepreneurship, while often viewed positively, tends to be infiltrated by improper regulations, thereby undermining the value of academic research (Barnett, 2008).

Universities' revenues mostly rely heavily on local student fees. Across the world, student fees have been increasing in higher education systems (Cantwell, 2015). In some countries, an increase in student fees is reflected in government policy, as in the United Kingdom, while in others, decisions on fee increases are made in isolation of national policies. In both cases, the intent is to share the cost of education between the government and students' families. In many cases, such increases result from a decrease in government funding support for local universities and domestic students, leading universities to shift toward reliance on international students and the fees they bring in. Student fees as a revenue source are more prominent at public universities due to the

reduction in public funding for tertiary education (Ehrenberg, 2012). In many cases, the tuition fees of international students are higher than those of domestic students. Cantwell (2015), in his study of the effect of increased international student enrolment on net tuition revenue, found that international and out-of-state students tend to pay higher tuition than in-state students. However, his findings indicate that not all institutions are able to generate additional income by enrolling additional international students.

ISM and Social Impact

Altbach (2002) argues that treating education as an intellectual product to be bought and sold in a commercial market is an oversimplification. He claims that there are “values of the national and social common good that must be protected and preserved in a globalised educational environment,” (p.2) and that education should be recognised and treated differently from other parts of the marketplace. In doing so, less powerful institutions and actors would not be subjected to an unequal marketplace, which deprives them of the right to make decisions on their systems, curriculum, and standards.

ISM literature focusing on the threat of commercialisation highlights the financial burdens of increasing tuition fees to students and families. According to Gao (2021), academic economic pressure far exceeds concerns around transportation, consumer, and housing costs, and more families now rely on government loans and commercial banks to cover higher education costs. Gao (2021) further argues that universities should generate revenue from online education rather than continuously increasing student fees, so that families are not left with hefty education loans and students can access education more fairly. Exorbitant tuition fees prevent students from disadvantaged backgrounds from accessing international and mobility programmes, leading to exclusion in HE. Access to HE has historically been recognised as a privilege of the middle and upper classes, those who can afford high tuition fees (Archer et al., 2003), whether for local or international studies. The commercialisation of IHE raises the question of whether ISM contributes to the further exacerbation of social inequality in HE. However, literature examining the financial and exclusionary implications of ISM in developing countries remains insufficient to provide conclusive knowledge about the impact of commercialised ISM in this area.

Other ISM literature veers away from the commercialisation of ISM; instead, debates focus on the benefits and threats of ISM, often overlooking the lived experiences and voices of international students concerning their mobility. Aziz and Abdullah (2013) explore students' standpoints in ISM management by focusing on their academic journeys and experiences. ISM delivery lies in the collective and systematic efforts of institutions at all levels, and as such, analysis should be conducted institution-wide. Pham (2022) recommends focusing on postgraduate studies, schools, and

the vocational education and training sectors. Voices from postgraduates, their challenges and perspectives on the kind of tertiary education they receive through ISM programmes, remain rare in the current literature.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on two public universities in Thailand and the Philippines. Both are located in metropolitan cities and have been running ISM programmes for the past ten to twenty years: one through direct international student recruitment and the other through student exchange programmes with foreign university partners.

Sampling and Research Participants

The study used purposive sampling techniques to identify and select individuals for their in-depth knowledge of their institutions' ISM and, more broadly, IHE strategies, as well as their perspectives on changing trends, drivers, motivations, and threats to ISM in Thailand and the Philippines over the last two decades. The participants were from two publicly funded universities in Thailand and the Philippines. The sample size was eight respondents, four from each university. These respondents were selected based on the following criteria: knowledge and familiarity with ISM programmes, position, decision-making roles, direct engagement with ISM programmes, and number of years managing ISM. Research participants consisted of a senior lead on international partnerships, an ISM coordinator, a student recruitment officer, and a student affairs officer from each of the two universities.

Table 1 Profile of ISM of the Subject Institutions

	University T	University P
Type of Institution	Publicly funded	Publicly funded
Name of International Student Mobility Programme	Inbound mobility of international students into 2 international programmes	Student mobility through over 30 student exchange initiatives
When did ISM start?	2008	ISM numbers only started to be collected in 2013, but ISM had existed since the early 2000s

Table 1 Profile of ISM of the Subject Institutions (Cont.)

	University T	University P
Number of students	Average of 40-50 students per year 30% are inbound international students (mostly Chinese) and 70% are local students	Average inbound students/year - 15 Average outbound students/year - 350
Cost	Thai students THB 130,000 / per year (USD 3,750) International students THB 154,000 / per year (\$4,450)	Cost for students to participate in student exchanges per year (estimates made in 2024) Ranging from Php 68,000 - Php 122,000 (\$1,191-2,100)
Qualification earned	Full degree (upon completion of the international programme, including a student exchange component)	Certificate of having completed the programme (non-credit bearing) which is treated as an additional credential for employment purposes

Data Collection Method and Analysis

The study draws on desk research for secondary data and interviews for primary data. Through desk research, data on ISM numbers and trends in Thailand and the Philippines were collected, providing a profile of ISM and ISM strategies in the two countries over the last ten to twenty years. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed respondents to discuss their perspectives and reflections, drawing on their experiences related to ISM.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews. The author used the simple 6-phase theoretical thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as the step-by-step guide for analysis of the interview data. Through this analytical method, the author (1) reviewed all interview transcriptions, (2) identified prominent patterns or emerging themes from the participants' responses, (3) developed sub-codes from the main themes, (4) collated supporting data that respond to, corroborate, or validate the neoliberalism theoretical framework of this research, (5) reviewed and refined the themes, and (6) wrote up the narratives.

Given that some of the respondents hold senior positions within the universities, it was important that their anonymity was respected. All respondents were provided with a full explanation of the purpose of the research and of their right to informed consent. The researcher agreed to preserve both confidentiality and anonymity of the institution and respondents.

Results and Analysis

Changing Landscape of ISM

Higher Education Enrolment. Since the very first university in Thailand (Chulalongkorn University) was established in 1917, Thailand’s higher education sector has grown dramatically with 155 degree granting universities and colleges in 2022 (84 public, 71 private). However, with Thailand’s demographic shift towards an ageing society, the number of enrolments in higher education has been decreasing since 2013, from 2.1 M to 1.6 M in 2021 (Figure 1). The decline in local student enrolments has spurred international student recruitment in Thailand, expanding universities’ reach to the Chinese and ASEAN student market to compensate for the lack of Thai students.

In the Philippines, the first university was established in 1611, University of Santo Tomas. However, American colonisation (1898-1946) shaped the current education system, characterised by the use of English as the medium of instruction, the development and funding of tertiary institutions by the government, the high premium placed on education, and a *laissez-faire* attitude toward private institutions (Santiago, 1991). Tertiary education continues to expand in the Philippines. As of January 2024, there are 1,977 higher education institutions (HEIs), of which 113 are state-funded, 1,714 are private, and 13 are other government-supervised or special institutions (Commission on Higher Education, 2024). Unlike Thailand, student enrolment continues to increase, a jump from 3.5 M to 4.8 M in 2022 (Figure 2).

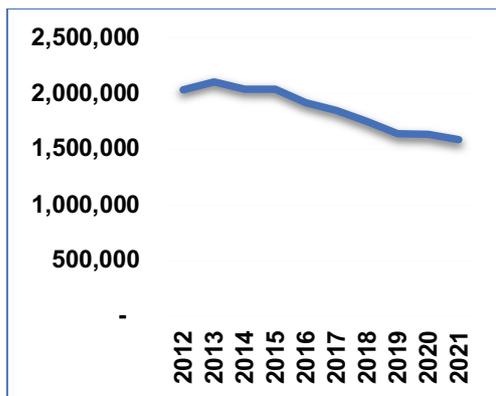


Figure 1 Higher Education Enrolment
in Thailand

Source: UNESCO National Commission (2022)

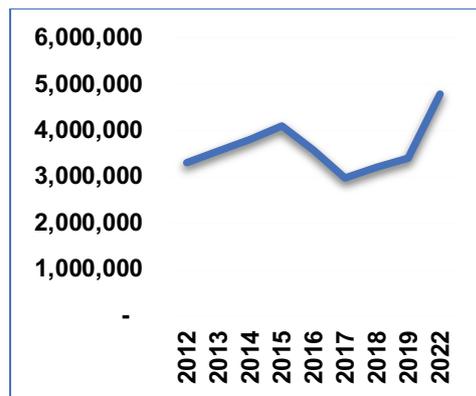


Figure 2 Higher Education Enrolment
in the Philippines

Source: Commission on Higher Education (2022)

Table 2 Number of Outbound Students in the ASEAN Region (2018)

Country	Number of outbound students globally	Number of outbound students intra-ASEAN	Total enrolment in tertiary education	% of total enrolled students who are outbound to all countries	% of total enrolled students who are outbound in ASEAN
Brunei Darussalam	3,315	1,023	11,593	28.59	8.82
Cambodia	5,928	1,784	207,603	2.86	
Indonesia	47,574	10,830	7,944,099	0.60	0.14
Lao PDR	5,064	4,024	111,411	4.55	
Malaysia	63,253	1,104	1,248,927	5.06	0.17
Myanmar	8,965	2,469	771,321	1.16	
Philippines	17,197	702	3,589,484	0.48	0.02
Singapore	23,715	971	194,615	12.19	
Thailand	32,119	2,554	2,410,713 (2016)	1.33	0.11
Vietnam	94,662	1,872	2,307,361 (2016)	4.10	
Total	301,792	28,333	18,7979,127	1.61	0.15

Source: ASEAN Secretariat 2020

As shown in Table 2, both Thailand and the Philippines are not popular study abroad markets. Within ASEAN, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia are the top 3 countries for outbound students. Intra-ASEAN outbound students compared to those studying outside of ASEAN is very small. Studies have shown that this trend is due to the continued pull of the reputation and prestige of Western universities (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011).

Figure 3 illustrates the inbound inflow of students and Figure 4 shows the outbound mobility ratio in Thailand and the Philippines. Thailand joins Malaysia and Singapore with the largest number of inbound students (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). Although the number of inbound students in the Philippines is smaller compared with other ASEAN markets, the Philippines was the fastest growing destination for international students from 2020 to 2023, with India and China as the main sources (ApplyBoard, 2024). CHED affirmed the dominance of Indian and Chinese students as reflected in their 2022-2023 data, with 8,973 Indians and 5,334 Chinese out of the 17,202 international students. Nigerians came third with 838 students. On the other hand, international

students in Thailand mostly come from China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. China dominates the international students' space in Thailand (Yin et al., 2015) with Chinese students mostly self-funded.

Thailand is positively perceived by international students as a low-cost alternative to universities in the West. Scholarships, pastoral care, less formal relationships between teachers and students, geographical location and cultural proximity are what attract international students to Thailand (ICEF Monitor, 2023). International students in the Philippines cite the ease of using English as one of the national languages and the availability of courses taught in English as key advantages. The much lower tuition fees and cost of living also attract students, as does the US-based university system (Study Portal, 2024).

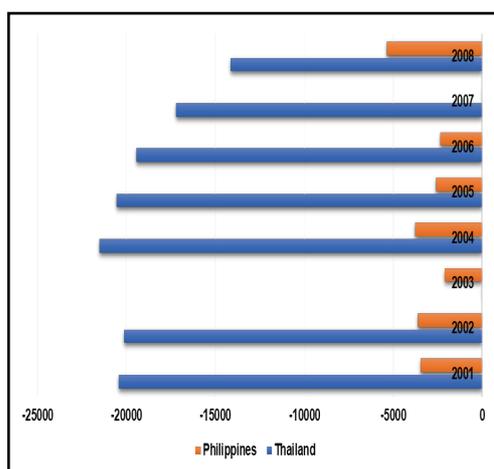


Figure 3 Inflow of Internationally Mobile Students in Thailand and the Philippines

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics

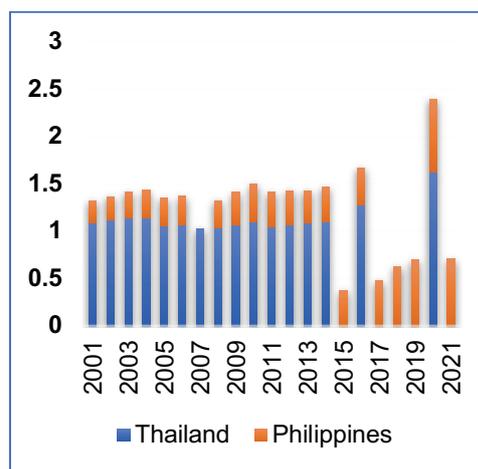


Figure 4 Outbound Mobility Ratio in Thailand and the Philippines

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics

Canada is the first-choice destination of Filipino students (38%), followed by Australia (31%), according to IDP (2022). Filipinos account for 4% of the total international student population in Canada, as reflected in data from the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE). The popularity of Australia and Canada is driven by the migratory aspirations of Filipino students who are interested in eventually emigrating to the UK and use these countries as an entry point.

For Thai students, Australia, the USA, and the United Kingdom ranked first to third, respectively. UNESCO 2023 data indicate that there are 28,609 mostly self-funded Thai students studying abroad (Education Fair.Net, 2024). Until the mid-1990s, the US was the primary study destination for Thais, but since the 1997 financial crisis, Australia has claimed the first spot, followed by the United Kingdom. China and Japan are increasingly popular study destinations for Thais.

Popular Fields of Study of International Students. There is no historical data that accounts for the trends of foreign students' preferences in fields of study in the Philippines. However, for Indian, Chinese, and Nigerian students, who make up the largest number of international students, the medical field (including nursing programmes) and marine engineering remain the most popular fields. In contrast, local students prefer business management, engineering, education, and information technology (IDP, 2022). In Thailand, a 3-year trend from 2006 to 2009 indicates Business Administration, Thai Language, English Language, Marketing, Business Language, International Business, and Thai Studies as top preferences for international students. OHEC 2019 data further affirms that this continues to be a trend.

Student Mobility and Transnational Education. Knight (2016) defines transnational education (TNE) as “mobility of programmes and providers between countries” (p.2). Transnational education allows universities to offer “internationalisation at home” through international academic partnerships with overseas universities. In contrast to traditional physical mobility, TNE covers educational services in which courses and qualifications are made accessible to students located in other countries (Knight, 2016). This alternative to traditional mobility enables universities to access new student markets and students can gain international qualifications without having to travel, making TNE affordable and more convenient for students.

In 2019, according to MHESI data, there were 119 international academic programmes in Thailand involved in partnerships with overseas universities, 78 double degree programmes, 9 joint degree programmes, and 32 national degree programmes. Data from MHESI demonstrates that the number of programme partnerships is on the rise, year on year, from 2011 to 2016, with the increase driven by the number of double degree programmes. In the same period, dual and triple degree programmes are mostly concentrated in the fields of science and engineering (50%), business-related (20%), languages and literature (13%), and the remaining, much smaller percentage in other fields (education, medicine, fine arts, social sciences, and law). Most Thai universities that engage in TNE programmes are publicly funded.

In the Philippines, there is an increasing push for transnational education to internationalise the higher education sector. In 2019, the country passed the Transnational Higher Education Law, which allows foreign universities to provide education services in-country through partnering with Philippine universities (Universities UK, 2023). This push was buoyed by the success of the British Council and the Philippines' Commission on Higher Education (CHED) jointly funded project on TNE where 17 dual/double degree UK-Philippines postgraduate programmes were developed by 11 institutions. According to CHED data, in 2016, 13 additional local institutions were offering TNE degrees authorised by CHED, mostly in the form of franchising, joint degrees, and dual or double degrees (British Council, 2016).

The branch campus is a relatively new phenomenon in both countries. In Thailand, there are three foreign educational institutes, two of which are located in Bangkok (CMKL University, established in 2017, and Amata University, established in 2018) and one in Chonburi (Asian Institute of Hospitality Management, established in 2020). In the Philippines, there is no international branch campus yet. However, with the TNE Law in place, the country signals its openness to hosting branch campuses. The governments of both countries have little involvement in the universities' TNE arrangements, and student fees are set by the universities.

Changing Narratives on ISM: Institutional Perspectives

Mixed and Nuanced Views on Economic and Social Drivers of ISM. Knight (1999) points to economic rationale as a key driver for student mobility, other than social and cultural factors. Findings from interviews with Thai and Philippine respondents, who were cognizant of their mandate as public universities, downplayed the economic benefits of international students to their institutions, instead highlighting the benefits to their students of life-changing inter-cultural experiences. This resonates with Snodin's (2019) call for a more nuanced definition of internationalisation that moves away from the crude perception that internationalisation merely constitutes the intake of overseas students. Respondents' views are mixed and nuanced, with an emphasis on the importance of ISM outcomes, namely the development of a global mindset through learning in a diverse, multicultural setting, which prepares students to effectively engage with perspectives and cultures outside their home country. All respondents are emotionally invested in supporting ISM, helping their students to grow and benefit from mobility opportunities. With public funding a key resource for Thai and Philippine universities, there is a conscious and deliberate effort to adhere to their public and civil mandates.

Motivations and drivers for international mobility are clearly dependent on a country's socio-demographics and the extent to which universities are financially supported, either by public funds or other sources of revenue. With Thailand's ageing population, the pressure to enroll more Thai students is a clear concern among Thai respondents, especially given the growing competition both locally and regionally. Unlike Thailand, local demand is more than adequate for the majority of Philippine universities.

ISM forms part of a larger institutional agenda for internationalisation, and as such, reciprocity and long-term cooperation as approaches to international partnerships are heavily emphasised by the respondents. This contrasts with the concept that ISM is competitive and economic in nature. To a degree, this also challenges the neoliberal perspective of ISM, as it reveals a perception that ISM and IHE, more broadly, are enabling institutional actors to contribute positively to changing the lives of their students. The social outcomes of ISM sit side by side with the economic

rationale. This is particularly apparent from the Thai interviews, where all respondents, across all positions, equate ISM with “advancing career,” “providing international opportunities,” “enhancing employability,” “creating useful networks,” “becoming globally competitive,” “becoming better people,” and “life-changing chances,” while at the same time mentioning that their programme should be beneficial to the students and society. As one Thai respondent shared: “In the long run, the programme will need to be valuable to society, can socially contribute, then we can use that to market the programme. It benefits the society but also business.”

Changing Approach to Student Recruitment. As the literature indicates, changes in government funding for higher education institutions, changing demographics, and a decline in domestic students’ enrolment, all gave way to cross-border education. HEIs over the past years have started adopting aggressive marketing strategies to attract international students. Traditional methods of student recruitment simply do not apply anymore given the shifting demographics, evolving student expectations, and industry needs. Respondents acknowledge that universities are up against a reality where they need to adopt new strategies to remain competitive. Universities have taken a more hands-on approach to student recruitment, targeted at both the students and their parents. For Thai respondents, their shift to student-experience-focused marketing targets local Thai students from middle to upper class families. In contrast, for Philippine respondents, the heightened marketing focus is specifically for outbound mobility. This increased push is reflected in their drive to include student exchanges in their Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) with partner universities. For Philippine respondents, a one-way flow of outbound mobility is preferred, considering the balancing act that the university has to make and its moral obligation as a state-funded institution.

Internationalisation efforts are now realised through MOUs (Evans, 2024), which are increasingly used as a tool to facilitate international partnership arrangements for mobility. For the respondents, having a MOU in place means they and their partner universities can mutually recruit students for student exchanges, although student mobility is not always a 2-way flow, as it still depends on student demand.

Changing Views about International Students: Local versus International. International students are the new global generation according to Rizvi (2005). As the literature has shown, international students contribute economically and socially, and the diversification of the student body enriches learning, dynamics, and interactions among students. Generally, the literature regards ISM in a positive light, but discourses are increasingly calling for better and deeper understanding of the impact of the steady increase in the number of international students for local students and for the host institutions (Wu & Wilkes, 2017).

Internationalisation is precisely for international knowledge exchange, but interview findings reveal that university actors do not necessarily welcome foreign students, and at times are downright resistant to accepting them, mainly because of the additional operational effort and its implications for teaching and classroom management. The latter is mostly centered around the language barrier. Philippine respondents indicated that even academics resist having foreign students in class because while English is the medium of instruction, teaching is enriched by using both English and the local language.

Local students' acceptance of international students has changed over the years, according to both Thai and Philippine respondents. Other than the language barrier and class dynamics, participation and attendance are also key concerns of the respondent-universities in teaching a classroom mixed with international students. Foreign students may skip classes to travel and only return for the last few weeks of the semester, thus impacting the expected interactions between Thais and foreign students, according to Thai respondents. A Philippine respondent indicated that foreign students are not familiar with a system which requires a certain number of hours for attendance, and prefer not to have classes on Mondays, in order to lengthen time to travel on weekends.

Interestingly, however, this "acceptability" of international students also depends on whether the foreign students are Asian or Western. Asian students tend to integrate more effectively with local Thai and Filipino students due to cultural similarities, while local students find Westerners (American and European students) more intimidating, thus significantly affecting their interactions.

Continuing Challenges for ISM: Reality of Public Funding

The reality is that public money is tight and will continue to be tight. Financing for education will remain a challenge. Given this context, participation in international education programmes such as studying abroad and student exchanges is limited to students from high-income families and to institutions with strong financial resources that can support the requirements of these international activities. Responses from interviews clearly indicate that commitment to providing international opportunities to students comes only if there is a guarantee of funding support. Lack of funding is acknowledged by all respondents. ISM is only one aspect of internationalisation, and it competes with the increasing push for university research. Thai respondents point to a policy that diverts budget for international education to promote international research among academics. In developing countries, funding will continue to be the only enabler for ISM for public universities. Much of the present student mobility is dependent on individuals paying their own fees. Government or public-funded student exchanges, like that of the subject Philippine university, are highly volatile and depend from year on year on the country's fiscal health. Both Thai and Philippine respondents share the opinion that continued demand for and interest in ISM depend

on the availability of funding, as mobility is costly for students. As one respondent put it, “Funding helps with the increase of students’ interest for mobility.”

Contributions and Implications

This study contributes to a better understanding of ISM at the institutional level, an area that is under-researched and under-represented in the literature. It takes the context of 2 developing countries and how their respective socio-economic demographics shape the internationalisation landscape. Importantly, research findings of this study point to the following governmental and institutional actions to address ISM challenges and leverage the changing IHE context:

1. Funding will continue to be a key factor in decisions around ISM -from both institutional and student perspectives. HEIs will continue to compete to attract fee-paying international students, and students’ considerations of where to study are multifaceted. Governments and HEIs should therefore focus on establishing more sustainable scholarships and financial aid programmes to support the international mobility of local students, as well as to attract and retain international students.
2. An increasingly competitive student market, along with changing student demographics, needs, and motivations, demands a re-thinking of traditional marketing strategies. A tailor-fitted approach, supported by data-driven insights and decision-making, will be crucial for HEIs. As such, HEIs should develop robust internal information systems and access up-to-date market information and data analytics to support marketing efforts aimed at reaching prospective students.
3. Decision makers at HEIs, policymakers and practitioners should together develop a conducive ecosystem for ISM that fosters multiculturalism, better integration and adjustments of international students within the host institution. English fluency bridges cultural gaps, thus institutions should ensure adequate English support to students. The social life outside of the academic environment is as important as the international students’ learning experience. Institutions should introduce and develop social activities for students that are closely attached to the university setting. This will enable the international students to better integrate academically.

Conclusion

This study finds that the narrative attached to IHE and in particular ISM is rapidly changing, and dependent on the context. This study has taken Thailand and the Philippines as two higher education contexts which have been dramatically altered and developed as a result of the global forces of neoliberalism and globalisation.

They remain, however, very distinct in terms of culture and history which have contributed towards their unique response to the changes in the internationalisation of their staff, students, and campuses. Consequently, the definition of internationalisation has also required a more nuanced approach, away from the rather crude perception of internationalisation as merely the intake of overseas students. While ensuring financial sustainability through international student fees is an important factor for the institutions in both countries, the skills, knowledge, and mindset to pursue professional opportunities on graduating have become equally prized in the internationalisation process itself.

With public funding a key resource for the Thai and Philippine universities, there is a conscious effort to adhere to their public and civil mandates. Prioritisation of local students over foreign students for their student exchanges reflects this need to anchor the mission of the university in the local and national context, in both countries. Inbound mobility is preferred, given certain moral obligations as state-funded universities that first and foremost serve the country and need to commit to social responsibility, sustainability and as hubs for research and instructional expertise. ISM also veers away from a wholly business-focussed entity when we consider how the respondents see ISM as part of an institutional agenda for internationalisation which places reciprocity and cooperation, as an approach to international partnerships, at its core. As we see from the focus on contributing institutionally towards the Sustainable Development Goals, the social outcomes of ISM sit very much side by side with the economic rationale.

It is clear from this study that increased commercialisation at institutions has resulted in the aforementioned trends, tensions, and changes in narratives around quality, access and management of ISM, as well as its impact on students, the academic community and, more broadly, the public. The study demonstrates a high level of awareness amongst respondents in the Thai and Filipino institutions of the internal and external factors that may hamper or boost ISM. It is the respondents' passion for providing an impactful international experience for their students that remains their key motivation to continue working hard to facilitate ISM within their institutions.

Limitations and Future Studies

The study only focused on ISM in Thailand and the Philippines and while some analyses are taken within the context of ASEAN, findings do not necessarily represent the wider ASEAN picture. Also, data from the study did not include specific external factors, such as the national agenda toward talent development, employment purposes, and graduate routes toward the employability dimensions of ISM. These factors likewise affect or interact with ISM, and ISM would benefit from further investigation of these interrelationships. The responses from the interviewees demonstrated their preoccupation with the internal strategic and administrative management of ISM and less concern for how ISM interacts with the wider (regional and global) ecosystem. Further studies may be conducted to examine in detail the intricate interactions which take place between the push and pull factors, as well as their varying importance within the institutional context, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of ISM at the institutional level.

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