

Application of International Education: How Would Skills and Knowledge Learned Abroad Work Back Home?

Neelawan Vanichakorn ¹

Abstract

The article discusses some empirical studies assessing the long-run impact and applications of study abroad when international students return home. Many studies report some difficulties international students face in adapting back to their home country while some studies focus on the transfer of knowledge obtained abroad. Abroad trained students, including Thai scholarship students, commented that they needed to be selective in the application of knowledge and ideas they had learned because of cultural differences, resource availability, and the constraints imposed by national curriculum. Other constraints found include resistance by certain aged superiors and jealous administrators, time constraints, and lack of governmental attention and confidence. The article also provides some suggestions on how Thai government and schools could support the returning overseas students.

Keywords: international education, study abroad, overseas leaning, international students, application of study abroad

¹ Instructor, Department of Social and Applied Science, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology North Bangkok

1. Introduction

The practice of obtaining education abroad, usually higher education, has been common in developing countries for centuries. According to Cumming's (1984) qualitative standpoint, studying overseas has become important only since World War II. The rate of global expansion for international students is sensitive to change in the world economy (Cummings, 1991). By region of origin of international students, Asia currently supplies the largest proportion of international students. Among the Asian subregions, Southern Asia's rate of growth peaked in the 1960s (Cummings, 1991). Both government and individuals in Third World countries consider university training in North America to be a source of considerable knowledge, skills, and prestige and go to considerable lengths to secure opportunities for such training. In the Thai language, there is a concept and term, *chup tua*, which connotes acquiring significant prestige by study and/or travel abroad.

Most literature on study abroad, much of which appeared in the 1960s and early 1970s, has focused on only two principal issues: the problem of cultural adjustment for students from developing nations who go to study in industrial countries such as the United States or the United Kingdoms and the so-called brain drain phenomena—when students coming to study abroad do not return to their countries of origin. There is relatively little analytical empirical work at the national level to assess the long-run impact and applications of study abroad when international students return home (Fry, 1984). Therefore, this article will discuss some empirical studies regarding the applications of knowledge and skills when international students, including Thai scholarship students, return home. The article will also provide some suggestions on how Thai government and schools could support the returning overseas students.

2. Possible Factors behind Sending Students Overseas

2.1 Basic Human Resource Capacity

One of the most common arguments for study abroad is that it is a mechanism for acquiring important technical skills relevant to development. Much of the demand for international study is focused on the scientific and technical fields. For example, during the early phase of Japanese development, there was a strong emphasis on sending Japanese technicians and students abroad to acquire new technical skills in a wide variety of fields relevant to national development (Wilkinson, 1983). Even today, Japan continues to send thousands of students abroad, particularly in fields related to science and technology. Similar to that of Japanese students, statistic of Thai students studying abroad under the supervision of the Civil Service Commission (CSC) showed that the majority of students studied science, technology, and engineering programs. Some other areas of study included agriculture, law, computer, business, and medical science (CSC, 2003).

2.2 Development of Foreign Language Competencies

Besides the development of technical skills, the other common factor that underlies sending students abroad is the development of foreign language competencies. Competency in a foreign language is particularly important for professionals in countries where the national language is not one used internationally (Fry, 1984). For example, professionals in countries like Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, and Nepal greatly need knowledge of an international language such as English to

be able to interrelate with professionals in other parts of the world as well as in their own regions. Barber, Altbach, and Myers (1984) view the extent to which a nation was involved in the international economic system as the major force pulling students overseas. Knowledge of an international language also opens up access to a wide variety of scholarly materials of a diverse ideological nature.

Finally, foreign language competency is often highly related to career success in both the private and public sectors in societies where the national language is not an international one (Fry, 1984). In his field research on the occupational attainment process in Thailand, Fry (1980) found that study abroad was considered a key explanatory variable. This research involved a sample of approximately 600 employees from large-scale private and public organizations in Bangkok. The results showed that study abroad was found to have a simple correlation of .43 with occupational attainment, broadly defined to include earnings, wealth, administrative power, and occupational prestige.

2.3 Domestic Opportunities for Higher Education

To the extent that a national education system provides large numbers of young people with the basic qualifications for study at the tertiary level, more young people from that nation will consider international study. The tendency to go overseas, however, may be offset by the availability of a large number of domestic places. One indicator of domestic opportunities is the ratio of university seats to the number of students in secondary schools. Israel, Thailand, and the Philippines lead in terms of this indicator (Fry, 1984). However, despite the great efforts made by various governments to meet the rising expectations in the field of higher education, serious problems have been encountered in most countries. In Korea and several rapidly developing countries, higher educational systems have undergone rapid expansion in recent years, but this has not significantly affected the propensity for going overseas. According to Cummings (1991), there are three explanations for this:

- (1) domestic higher educational expansion reflects a large and unmet private demand that is only partially accommodated by increase in domestic places;
- (2) to staff the newly created domestic institutions, a new pool of scholars with training at the graduate level is required;
- (3) the rapid quantitatively expansion of domestic higher education is usually not accompanied by qualitative upgrading, this enhancing the attraction of international education both for undergraduate and especially for graduate level programs.

Moreover, Hsueh (1978) asserts that most countries in Asia are facing a serious shortage of funds. They are short of buildings, teaching and research facilities, and qualified teachers. Many universities lack adequate classrooms, library resources, and laboratory equipment. Because of the shortage of qualified teachers and the rapid increase of the student population, classes tend to be extremely large. It has become a common phenomenon for classes to be attended by hundreds of students. Relations between teacher and student have become impersonal and sometimes almost non-existent, apart from contact in class with large number of students.

Another serious problem is related to the method of teaching (Hsueh, 1978). Both teachers and students rely heavily on textbooks. Most teachers are engaged in day-to-day teaching and have little time for research or writing textbooks. Therefore, university teaching depends largely on imported

textbooks, especially from the United States and England, as English is the first foreign language in many Asian countries. All these difficulties might in part explain why international education is still a very important component of Southeast Asian countries.

3. Dilemmas of Study Abroad

If training professionals in North America is so attractive, then where, from the point of view of the developing countries, is the dilemma? According to Weiler (1984), the problem arises from two different but related issues. One of those has to do with the difference in training needs between North American students and students from developing countries. To elaborate, graduate training in American universities in such fields as education, public administration and management, industrial engineering, economics, and most of the other social sciences is based on a body of research and predicated on a set of corresponding paradigms which are not necessarily applicable or relevant to the social, economic, and political reality of an underdeveloped country (Weiler, 1984). Weiler gives one example from the field of curriculum development:

The field of curriculum development...has come to loom large on the list of priorities of many developing countries for professional training....what remain problematic, however, is whether graduate instruction in our typical North American school of education conveys the kinds of skills and conceptual categories necessary to understand, anticipate, and influence the dynamics of the political process that is involved in the development of curriculum in developing countries. (p. 172)

The other relevant issue that has been raised involves the lack of relevance in the subject matter. Developing countries have discovered a range of drawbacks to international education (Goodwin, 1991). Much of the training is in fact irrelevant and returning students are alienated culturally and linguistically. In several instances, individuals were dissatisfied with their jobs upon returning because they were unable to use their recently acquired knowledge and skills. In a study of the transfer of training obtained abroad to Taiwan, Wang and Rawls (1975) found that a number of individuals indicated that changing jobs appeared to be the only means to alleviate their dissatisfaction. A similar result was revealed in another case study of Thailand. Nelson, Bhamarapravati, Koomsup, and Myers (1991) revealed that the reentry problems for Thai students who returned home after completion of training were partly the result of poor pay, poor logistics, and poor management support. The first author made his personal observation that "if a returning PhD does not begin to do the kind of work he has been trained to do in three years, there is a high probability that he will never be able to function as a research professional in his own area" (p. 132). One of the principal challenges facing the Thai universities today is to retain their highly skilled, foreign-trained faculty from migrating to better paid positions in the private sector (Nelson et al., 1991). Many Thai scholars tend to accept a job offered by the private sector where they receive better pay and find a more suitable position to best utilize their technical skills.

Another problem related to long-term overseas training is obvious; it is costly. Some developing countries have actually expended more on foreign scholarships than on their own higher educational systems (Goodwin, 1991). International education and training are essential, but the decision to invest in them

should take into account whether returning graduates will have jobs for which they have been trained. The sponsoring countries should also become increasingly careful to limit brain drain, curricular irrelevance, and excessive costs among their international students. Unfortunately, few nations have undertaken studies assessing the utility of international education and training. Among those investigations that have been carried out, very little attention has been focused upon individuals who have returned to their homeland. The next section of the article will focus on the transfer of knowledge obtained abroad and the adaptation of returning international students.

4. Returning International Students: How Would That Work Back Home?

After studying abroad for a year or even longer, returning to the home country can be as painful, though for the different reasons, as the initial experiences after arrival in the host country (Brislin and Pedersen, 1976):

The readjustment back home is likely to be even more difficult than going abroad in the first place, all the more since this adjustment is frequently unexpected. Not only has the trainee changed, but the back home culture has likewise changed, making it doubly difficult to readjust. People's expectations for returning may have been distorted in an unrealistically favorable direction by their very absence. When they find themselves unable to pick up where they left off or even to start from scratch at some new endeavor, they are likely to experience a reentry crisis. (p. 16)

Moreover, most returnees have experienced some degree of alienation and frustration; some even have felt the profound sense of loss and not belonging (Huxur, Mansfield, Nnazor, Schuetze, and Segawa, 1996). Becoming acculturated in the new environment, even with difficulties and problems, means gradually changing one's outlook and experience.

Apart from the readjustment to the culture and values of the home country, most of the problems the returnees encounter related to their professional lives. Gama and Pedersen (1977), using an interview, studied 31 Brazilians who returned from graduate study in the United States. Results indicated that returnees had little difficulty adjusting to life with their families. Most of their problems were related to adjusting to the system as a whole and to their role as professors. Adjusting to professional life in their sponsoring universities was the most difficult reentry problem for most returnees. They had high levels of expectation about the system and about their roles that were not met. Also, lack of intellectual stimulation, lack of facilities and materials, excessive red tape, lack of opportunity, and time to do research in their sponsoring universities were fairly common complaints among most of the returnees. Bochner, Lin, and Beverly (1980) studied the reentry phase of 15 Asian graduate students after attending the universities in the United States. The results confirmed Gama and Pedersen's (1977) findings that anticipated role conflict, particularly in the area of peer group and professional relations, was a major concern of many returnees. Some of the negative statements from the returnees in the study included "can't apply knowledge gained," "poor living environment," "not so much freedom," and "political conditions." Another large-scale study focused on individuals who had obtained training abroad and had returned to Taiwan to utilize their skills. Wang and Rawls

(1975) considered certain variables that affected the transfer of training from developed countries to Taiwan. One hundred-eighteen Chinese who had studied in foreign countries and had returned to work for a period of at least one year were asked to respond to a questionnaire designed to collect information on the transfer of knowledge and skills to Taiwan. The subjects reported some representative obstacles that prohibited the use of potentially applicable knowledge and skills. Those obstacles included cultural differences, personnel policies within their organization, certain government policies, insufficient funds, technical and legal differences in the two cultures, resistance by certain aged superiors and jealous administrators, time constraints, and lack of governmental attention and confidence.

McKnight and Turner (1995) suggest that it is common for researchers to report on linguistic, cultural, and personal difficulties international student may face in learning in a different language. Few studies have considered the curriculum offered to international students in various academic programs and the relevance to their home countries. Thus, the authors carried out a survey of 23 international ESL student teachers at a university in Australia. Most student teachers came from surrounding Asian countries such as Hong Kong, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam; approximately 50% attended on government scholarship. A particular emphasis of the study was on what these student teachers learned from their courses and what challenges they believed they would face upon returning to their home countries. Concerns about returning centered on developing flexibility in teaching approach, coping with large class size, and adapting learned skills to local content. Similarly, Hodson (1994) found that Thai teachers faced a lot of constraints in implementing communicative approaches, mainly due to the large class sizes. According to McKnight and Turner (1995), a number of respondents commented that they needed to be selective in the application of knowledge and ideas they had learned because of cultural differences, resource availability, and the constraints imposed by national curriculum:

Not every teaching methodology we have learned here is suitable to the context in Indonesia. Consideration should be given to aspects of local cultures and initial differences between English-speaking and Indonesian-speaking communities. ...some approaches...are not appropriate to my setting since they are designed to Australia and other developed countries where materials and resources for teaching can be produced quickly. (p. 9)

Among the 23 respondents, 13 were student teachers from Thailand. The biggest concerns among Thai language teachers included a lack of confidence in their English ability, despite the fact that they have coped very well with very demanding courses. Some were concerned that hard-won gains in their oral competence might be lost on their return as opportunities to practice English with native speakers were limited or non-existent. A number of Thai student teachers foresaw that their colleagues would present a challenge to them on their return and might prevent them from implementing new ideas:

Working with people who have strong beliefs on the superiority of the traditional approaches to language teaching over the new (more communicative) ones. Old-fashioned and narrow-minded teachers of English. Arguments on EFL methodology among scholars.

Lack of English teachers with overseas teaching experiences. (McKnight and Turner, 1995, p. 10)

One Thai teacher also referred to the limitations imposed upon her by the entrance examination system that may not take into account the changes in modern language teaching and the competing demands of the public as well as the parents on the curriculum.

In conclusion, common challenges teachers will face when they return home are the general lack of support from colleagues and from the government. As Wang and Rawls (1975) suggest, the training is often culturally bound and thus not always transportable when international students return to their home country. All too frequently, learning is not applicable due to a lack of opportunities and/or facilities, little or no understanding on the part of management, traditional attitudes, values, and behavior patterns, and resistance to change. Wang and Rawls (1975) also recommend that more forethought and planning will have to go into arranging for development, organizational and individual training needs to be met before optimal transfer of training can take place.

5. Implications for Practice

The implication for practice is that the Thai government should be more specific in sending Thai scholars abroad in terms of programs of study. Sending students overseas costs the nation a fortune; why do it if returning students cannot apply the skills and knowledge they have learned abroad? Previous research studies reported that returning overseas students need to be selective in the application of the knowledge and ideas they learned because of cultural differences, resource availability, and the constraints imposed by a national curriculum (Hodson, 1994; McKnight and Turner, 1995).

As a result, it is recommended that the Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC), who is responsible for the administration of government scholarships, should conduct more research and planning in arranging for Thai scholars to receive education and training abroad.

Moreover, the OCSC should carefully consider the placement of government scholarship recipients after graduation in government agencies where they can be provided with enough opportunities and facilities to support the implementation of what they have learned abroad. A better match between the returning teachers and schools should be considered. The returning teachers need to be placed in an environment where an optimal transfer of training can be occurred.

As for the role of the school or university where the returning scholars came back to work, they need to enable teachers to create the ambiance, environment, instructional media, and facilities in optimizing the working or teaching process. It is also important for the schools and the universities to provide opportunities for teachers to participate in various types of conferences and workshops, both locally and internationally, which would provide them with opportunities to keep-up-to-date as well as to maintain their language proficiency.

Another possibility would be to encourage collaborative endeavors among abroad trained teachers in different universities. Teachers should be encouraged to share their success, problems, obstacles, opinions, or ideas regarding their experiences in readjusting back to the cultures and values of the home country and in implementing new instructional strategies. This can be done easily through electronic-mail by creating a

mailing list. Collaborating with other teachers who have similar experiences can lead to a smooth transition and success in creating the working environment which best promotes a meaningful learning.

In addition, few research studies have been done in Thailand to investigate the utility of international education and training, especially in the area of teaching English as a foreign language. A major concern for future research should focus on how well returning overseas students can transfer the skills and knowledge gained abroad to school settings in Thailand.

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