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Thai *Menschenbild*: A Study of Chinese, Thai, and International Students in a Private Thai University as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

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Thai Higher Education (Thai HE) is changing, due to international reform. This paper presents data collected in a longitudinal study carried out in Thailand during 2017–2018 using the US version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and qualitative interviews. We offer a case study about the cultures and engagement of three groups of students found at an international private university in Thailand. The groups studied were international students, Chinese students in a mixed Thai/English curriculum and Thai students studying in Thai, all situated in a Thai HE institutional community. The (NSSE) was administered to 179 students: 89 in an International College, 54 Chinese students and 36 Thai students, as a control. Our results showed different attitudes toward studying, teachers, memorisation, participation, critical thinking, and empathy. This paper concludes with a discussion of how students in an international university in Thailand arrange themselves socially, and why this matters.

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Introduction

Thai Higher Education (Thai HE) is increasingly internationally competitive. However, it is constantly changing, as it is built on systems established during the boom of the university arena in the 1970s (Jones and Pimdee, 2017; Joungrakul, 2019; Kamnuansilpa, 2018; Kanjananiyot et al., 2002). This preceded a demographic catalyst in the 1990s and early 2000s when birth rates fell. There was, as a result, a drop in university uptake and decline in university subscriptions 18–20 years after the baby bust. This has resulted in not enough students to fill seats, in an economic setting that was far from ideal, even before COVID-19 impacted it considerably (Global Wealth Report, 2018; Lao, 2015). In 2017, our study site, an international Thai-run private university in Northern Thailand began recruiting students from China who would study in Chinese, English, and Thai to help offset this. Unfortunately, Quality Assurance (QA) evaluations used to evaluate learning in Thailand often miss the experience of the students who wrestle with varying expectations borrowed from a wide range of countries, traditions, national ideologies and even generational perceptions. The nature of these expectations are summarised in the German word *Menschenbild* which, when translated, means *picture of a human being* (Waters, 2012).

In Thai HE, the picture of the students is one rooted in ideas of harmonious hierarchical relationships, which creates a nationalist educational culture (Winichakul, 2015; Wittayasin, 2017; Ziguras and Gribble, 2015; Zilli, 2019). The *Menschenbild* is the image of a particular natural culture, so its nationalist tendencies which defines practices, performances, strategies, communities of interest, and goals; Thai *Menschenbild* therefore is treated in this paper as imprinted into learning culture, Thai pedagogy and is a feature of cross-cultural student integration that emerges in an educational institution and its policy (Chao and Moon, 2005; Waters and Day, 2022). What is interesting, of course, is that this essentially describes how forces exterior to the *habitus* create the norms and practices within it, thereby inviting conflict and potential for change across an entire community of practice, such as in universities, which has a direct impact on a nation (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

This is certainly true in Thailand where, as of 2021, student-led protests over freedoms introduced via the Internet shaped significant social transformation (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2021a). With this context in mind, this paper is part of a study of the cross-cultural integration of three groups of students studying at the university we conducted a study within, henceforth referred to as University A. Carried out in 2018, this paper presents research about student engagement at the first private university in Thailand, founded in 1974. It plays host to an early Thai-run higher education International College, which opened from 2004 and brought together many nationalities in an English-language curriculum. Our study began from a tentative hypothesis assuming Thai HE and government policy has created a *habitus* rooted in a Thai *Menschenbild*, which is embedded in authoritative patron-client academic systems (Lao, 2015).

As such, we were intrigued by the diversity of University A, which seemed to diverge from the typical Thai university setting and wider landscape. In this paper we present two parts of our data, utilising a survey research instrument, alongside interview data. We engaged students in a research process supported by and with the permission of University A, which was carried out over a year with a focus on the cultural integration of international students, whose views and identities were anonymised in the presentation of findings. We used the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a popular research tool in the United States (US), which was translated into Chinese and Thai. A secondary hypothesis was that there will be variation in student engagement

between distinct nationalities, i.e. their prior *Menschenbild* affects engagement and integration, especially in the face of efforts to subvert this by Thai nationalism, which is commonly termed *Thainess* within the context of the study, a term denoting a desire to maintain cultural autonomy and identity in the face of global internationalisation (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009).

The study of international education within Thailand is a growing field; such education is a new idea, one largely reflective of the digital expansion of educational technology, marketing and business that has brought a new generation of global learners connected via the Internet, which is quite a cultural shift for a country favouring cultural isolationism reflected in educational policy that furthers national identity and state service. This also disinclines and creates unforgeable conditions for academic work that seeks to identify inadequacies due to a cultural focus on loss of face (Day et al., 2021). Interesting Thai educational studies are now emerging, such as Ferguson (2021), Waters and Day (2022) and Eppolite and Burford (2021), which offer novel vantage points on academic migrants and university experience. Our paper seeks to offer a different view, focusing more on student experience within Thai HE.

This paper, then, treats the Thai *Menschenbild* as a potential process of assimilation into patron-client learning; analytical tools like the (NSSE) is thus a resource not fully understood in a Thai context. This Thai context has seen changes since 2018; academic reform of ranking qualification, and increased surveillance have all reshaped the learning *habitus* across the country (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2021b). In this respect, the toolkit used (NSSE, 1998) is potentially useful in measuring cultural differences rooted in national cultures akin to what Hofstede et al. (2010) and Hofstede (2001) “Cultural Compass” exercises offer, a point the authors have investigated through use of this data (Waters and Day, 2022). During the survey described here, we focus more on the international education and integration themes of discussion; after all, there were around 3000 Thai students in the Thai curriculum at University A, alongside several hundred international students. Indeed, as of 2017–2018, when the data that informed this study was gathered, there were students from more than 25 countries; an amazing sample clustered and described in Tables 1 and 2.

Despite being an international university, it is worth noting that, within the context of Thailand, University A represents an

Table 1 Age demographics of three research samples in study.

| | Mean age | Sample size | Std. dev. | Median |
|---------------|----------|-------------|-----------|--------|
| Chinese | 20.4 | 54 | 1.57 | 19 |
| International | 22.4 | 89 | 6.53 | 19 |
| Thai | 19.4 | 36 | 1.35 | 19 |
| Total | 22 | 179 | 4.86 | 19 |

Table 2 Gender demographics of three research samples in study.

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-------|
| Female | 29 (53.7%) | 44 (49.4%) | 15 (41.7%) | 88 |
| Male | 25 (46.3%) | 44 (49.4%) | 21 (58.3%) | 90 |
| Missing data/ other | / | 1 (1.1%) | / | 1 |
| Total | 54 (100.0%) | 89 (100.0%) | 36 (100.0%) | 179 |

increasing norm of Thai universities seeking to capitalise upon market forces and demands for English-medium programmes (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2019). Despite having a global focus, Thai universities with international programmes are often operationally managed with a Thai facing team, and must still comply with Thai accreditation processes; this is not a surprise, given that international programmes within Thailand are in their infancy. Within the context of University A, the International College represents, perhaps, 10% of the student body and, as discussed in this paper, there are blurred lines between students from overseas engaged in the Thai-side of the university, so learning in Thai or a modified Thai curriculum with English-medium delivery, and truly international students situated in a bespoke college.

As such, despite being a foundational international university, University A, upon writing, is managed by an entirely Thai senior leadership team with a traditionally Thai 'top-down' leadership approach that encourages embrace of the professional, cultural and spiritual ethos of a Thai university, which has been observed as problematic for encouraging cross-cultural inclusion (Waters and Day, 2022). In insightful work, given international studies of international education within Thailand are still few and far between, Ferguson (2021) describes the complexities of developing international programmes and aptly summarises these as everything 'not Thai'. This describes a mentality echoing historical and socio-cultural emphasis of independence from foreign powers, which draws heritage from an ancestral idea of education as imported into Thailand to further the state, rather than self-advancement, which conditions adherence to power and patron-client authority that shapes thinking (Low et al., 2020).

This is a point echoed by Lao (2015) who recognises the paradoxical tension between a desire to emulate the academic prowess of Euro-American models of higher education but then co-opt symbols, status and curriculum of the Thai state. This means that there is often an emphasis on rote learning, rather than critical thinking autonomy. Cast onto the inherently political stage, in earlier work of relevance Ferguson (2019, p. 45) suggests educational development in Thailand as being about 'Bangkok, the rest and the West', a point emphasizing that educational development and management in Thailand is, like most other aspects of Thai life, centralised in Bangkok, where the offices managing university accreditation are located. Typically too, the older Thai universities in central Bangkok are seen of higher status than those increasingly beyond it, especially if they are privately managed, so not under the patronage of the state. Thus, University A, as a private provincial university at a distance to Bangkok, is managed with different emphasis, generating its own identity and cultural heritage tied more towards spirituality, given it was founded, and has a management board influenced by, a spiritually driven missionary organisation which, for its leaders, is important alongside Thai identity.

In Ferguson's (2021) narrative enquiry, the university executive that was interviewed positioned outcomes that indicated Thai culture and geographical location as integral to the way a university engages with international education. Perhaps, in the view of both authors, the reports of a more inclusive vision of Thai HE and a challenge to Thainess is made possible because of the distance to Bangkok, hence the state, and thus enables more flexibility to pursue international partnership. Ultimately, however, whilst the role of University A is identified as being international, the nature and identity is still very Thai. Lao (2015) alongside Day and Skulsuthavong (2021a, 2021b, 2022), as well as many others, have all established that malpractice, maleficence and Machiavellian management methodologies are deployed across Thai universities, often echoing principles of management and practice that are completely incompatible with international ideas of ontological exploration, epistemological achievement and

doing no harm as a researcher. Of course, whether western universities truly embrace these ideals is a matter of debate. What is clearer, is that the role of international education in Thailand is not clearly defined (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2019). For many choosing a Thai degree, embracing the Thai educational rhetoric of learning knowledge to advance the state will be a challenge and this limits immersing into a multicultural foreign setting from overseas.

For some, perhaps many, western and Chinese students, Thai HE simply offers a more affordable tuition, and cheaper cost of residence whilst studying. Embracing Thai identity long-term is besides the point. Meanwhile, for students from other parts of Asia, particularly nearby Myanmar, Korea, and China an international Thai degree is likely one of few options they have to gain a degree with some sense of international repute, in a language, English, that is more widely spoken than Thai. As our findings discuss, the decision and selection to join University A extends an emphasis of self-empowerment, meaning and independent trajectory, often enabling students to form relationships, live autonomously from parents, and allows them more diverse experiences than they could find in home countries. This is not a great leap. Thailand, at a policy as well as common-practice level, often operates two-factor and tier pricing, as well as preference, with respect to domestic and international residents. In this sense, we hope to invite discussion of the wider responsibilities University A, and other similar international universities in Thailand, and wider South-East Asia, have, including furthering debate about what student affairs support needs to be refined in order to best support such students.

Our data clearly shows cultural diversity and challenges of incorporating different students together, which is often driven by their own communities of practice, rather than by any sense of official policy or concern. As global education develops within Thailand and elsewhere, international programmes need to become a more holistic balance between learning and welfare. This is not an easy challenge, as many delicate factors must first be considered, which includes how to run such international universities, as well as what the distinct purpose of these international programmes are, within Thailand. As Ferguson (2021) wrote, some Thai rural universities have managed to straddle this delicate balance by incorporating international identity at the core of their university ethos, as a cultural symbol. How University A accomplished this (or not) is discussed in our data analysis. What is clear, is that provincial universities globally, and within Thailand, exist as diversely ranged universities, with dynamic and unique student bodies, which are worthy of critical investigation and cross-analysis through using global educational research methods and tools to better understand this inherently hybrid set of learning cultures being reshaped by the Internet and globalisation (Day et al., 2015; Day, 2019).

Research methodology

Hence, University A internally reviewed a research study proposal, which was drafted by one author who then led a multi-disciplinary team and applied for a small grant in 2017. This allowed compensation for a variety of translators to help facilitate informed communication of the research process. In line with standard Thai HE practice, a project report summarising the data found was written by an author and is available on request as a research data-set that is stored offline in a physical university repository (see Waters, 2019). Our study used a variety of different research instruments, each yielding different kinds of data we have examined through different lenses (Cohen et al., 2007). This paper uniquely analyses one aspect of that data, so the NSSE and interview data, to inform an educational discussion in a

larger case study promoting mixed methods research and championing student voice in the evolving Thai context (Waters and Day, 2022). To recap, we operated from two hypotheses:

1. The Thai education system has created a *habitus* rooted in a Thai *Menschenbild*, which is embedded in Thai universities and would create an impact on engagement, shaping the many nationalities we found in the International College.
2. There will be variations in student engagement based on the assumptions that students bring with cultural nuances from their home countries, or bring to their host university, i.e. a *Menschenbild* that resists any Thai norms or nature.

Data was analysed using SPSS 3.23. The role of universities in Thailand is changing; international ones, as at University A, are becoming more common in Thailand, as the demand for

international English-medium courses under a Thai initiative known as *Thailand 4.0*, which identifies that the global influence is now proximal to any learning experience and seeks to build a digital economy (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2019). This is a new and challenging issue in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but also in Europe despite its ERASMUS programme; coming to understand how students from diverse cultures create and recreate *Menschenbild* during their time studying, outside their home country, is intriguing, and we felt worth studying in the context of a strong Thai nationalist learning setting. The validity and reliability of the (NSSE) as a reliable research tool is demonstrated in the US where it was used to evaluate how well students engage with an undergraduate curriculum (Coates and McCormick, 2014). First administered in 2000, the (NSSE) is now used in around 1600 US universities as a monitoring tool for administrators to understand student engagement. We used the NSSE as one of several substantive data-gathering research instruments, focusing on the experience of using this tool within our article. For this paper, then, we report the American version that was used in English, and also translated into Thai and Chinese by our associates to accommodate students whose English-medium skills were less confident.

A variety of the NSSE questions were changed or omitted specific to the American *Menschenbild*, including such as those about American identity, “Greek life” (i.e. fraternities), and other case-specific cultural-isms inappropriate to the Thai context. The vulnerability of the method is that it reflects the American *Menschenbild* and the American university context. NSSE questions are set in LIKERT measures. Embedded in the questions are assumptions rooted in American norms for what is expected of undergraduate education (Waters, 2015). To account for this and the obvious bias of the NSSE, we also interviewed students from the three groups, which are included as extracts within this paper. The interviews were carried out in English, Chinese, and Thai respectively. English and Chinese interviews were individual, while the Thai interviews were done as a focus group. There was intended convenience sampling for NSSE respondents. The research was subject to an application and internal research review at University A, under the lead authors purview. The study sought a sample size of at least 30 from each group and this is expanded in summary demographics in Tables 1–4 that show values that are expressed in total count, usually as a percent. Sample demographics, such as age, gender, nationality and major are expressed in Tables 2–4.

We interviewed students who responded to the survey and opted-in to our request, and we arranged a number of translators for

Table 3 Nationality of students in the sample (rows), and the primary language of the students in each classroom, i.e. Chinese, English (International), and Thai.

| Nationality | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-------|
| Cambodia | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| China | 54 (100.0%) | 12 (13.4%) | 0 | 66 |
| Filipino | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| German | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Italian | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Japan | 0 | 6 (6.7%) | 0 | 6 |
| (Kachin) | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Korea | 0 | 4 (4.4%) | 0 | 4 |
| Laos | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Malaysia | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Myanmar/Burma | 0 | 10 (11.0%) | 0 | 10 |
| Nepal | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Russian | 0 | 2 (2.2%) | 0 | 2 |
| Singapore | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Thai | 0 | 25 (28.1%) | 36 (100.0%) | 61 |
| Thai/American | 0 | 3 (3.3%) | 0 | 3 |
| Thai/Australia | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Thai/Britain | 0 | 3 (3.3%) | 0 | 3 |
| Thai/German | 0 | 2 (2.2%) | 0 | 2 |
| Thai/New Zealand | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Thai/Swiss | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| UK/Britain | 0 | 3 (3.3%) | 0 | 3 |
| US/American | 0 | 7 (7.8%) | 0 | 7 |
| Total | 54 (100.0%) | 89 (100.0%) | 36 (100.0%) | 179 |

Values are expressed in total count, and as a percent.

Table 4 College major demographics by three sample expressed in total, and as a %.

| Major | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---------------|------------|-------|
| Communication Arts | 0 | 0 | 29 (80.6%) | 29 |
| English Communication | 0 | 20 (22.0%) | 0 | 20 |
| Economics | 0 | 0 | 7 (19.4%) | 7 |
| English | 4 (7.6%) | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 5 |
| Exchange student | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Finance and Banking | 24 (45.2%) | 0 | 0 | 24 |
| Hospitality Industry Management | 0 | 33 (37.0%) | 0 | 33 |
| International Business Management | 0 | 22 (24.8%) | 0 | 22 |
| Information Technology | 0 | 10 (11.0%) | 0 | 10 |
| Thai for Communication | 25 (46.1%) | 0 | 0 | 25 |
| Part-time student | 0 | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 1 |
| Missing | 1 (1.1%) | 1 (1.1%) | 0 | 2 |
| Total | 53 | 89 | 36 | 179 |

Table 5 How often do you ask another student for help (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 5 (7.8) | 12 (10.6) | 7 (5.5) | 24 |
| % Within column | 0.1 | 0.17 | 0.19 | 0.15 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 19 (24.8) | 31 (33.6) | 26 (17.5) | 76 |
| % Within column | 0.37 | 0.45 | 0.72 | 0.49 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 25 (16.0) | 24 (21.7) | 0 (11.3) | 49 |
| % Within column | 0.49 | 0.35 | 0 | 0.31 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 2 (2.3) | 2 (3.1) | 3 (1.6) | 7 |
| % Within column | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.08 | 0.05 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 69 | 36 | 156 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-Square 25.464, df = 6, Significance 0.000. Missing data (MD) = 23.

Table 7 Have you worked with other students on course projects or assignments (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 6 (12.8) | 19 (17.3) | 14 (9.0) | 39 |
| % Within column | 0.12 | 0.28 | 0.39 | 0.25 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 28 (24.8) | 27 (33.6) | 21 (17.5) | 76 |
| % Within column | 0.55 | 0.39 | 0.58 | 0.49 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 15 (11.4) | 20 (15.5) | 0 (8.1) | 35 |
| % Within column | 0.29 | 0.29 | 0 | 0.22 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 2 (2.0) | 3 (2.7) | 1 (1.4) | 6 |
| % Within column | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.04 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 69 | 36 | 156 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 19.569, df = 6, significance 0.03 (two tailed). MD = 23.

Table 6 How often have you explained course material to one or more students?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 2 (5.6) | 11 (7.5) | 4 (3.9) | 17 |
| % Within column | 0.04 | 0.16 | 0.11 | 0.11 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 22 (22.2) | 19 (30.1) | 27 (15.7) | 69 |
| % Within column | 0.43 | 0.28 | 0.75 | 0.44 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 23 (17.3) | 30 (23.4) | 0 (12.2) | 53 |
| % Within column | 0.45 | 0.44 | 0 | 0.34 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 4 (5.9) | 9 (8.0) | 5 (4.8) | 18 |
| % Within column | 0.08 | 0.13 | 0.14 | 0.12 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 69 | 36 | 156 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Cells include observed counts, and in parentheses the expected count is if distributions were random with respect to Chinese, International, and Thai status. Pearson Chi-Square, 32.954, df = 6, Significance (two-tailed) 0.000. MD = 23.

students who could not speak English fluently or conversationally. Findings were securely stored by the lead author, whilst ethical considerations of harm were evaluated in the context of the original research proposal, in particular explanations offered in a variety of languages that discussed the aspects of the investigation, and obtained voluntary consent (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2021a; Cohen et al., 2007). The study triangulated across different nationalities, widening scope (see Table 2). In the Thai group, there were 60% males, a ratio we note, anecdotally, is unusually high in Thailand, where more commonly the largest number of university attendees are female. The spread of majors for the Thai students, in particular, reflects the convenience nature of the sample. We specifically used classes in Communication Arts (29/36) and Economics (7/36) of the Thai curriculum students, due to access practicalities. In the case of the Chinese, almost 50% were in a new “Thai for Communication” (25/53) major and the rest of the students in Finance and Banking. The range of students taking the survey in the International College reflected various majors found in that college, since shared General Education classes were point-of-access for survey.

Results and discussion of NSSE findings

The (NSSE) yielded results about the engagement of students in the sample and their identity (see Tables 5–7) explored student responses to questions involving study habits and learning styles. However, Table 8 has surprising results, because the Chinese students reported that “during the current school year” they asked questions with the highest frequency, and International students the least. The Thai students were in the middle, despite often being quiet in most classes as patron-client learners. Among faculty, Chinese students are known for being quiet and having low levels of participation. Table 9 describes preferred learning styles; the NSSE asked students about how much they remembered material. There was no significant difference; three groups were grouped at the middle of the distribution for discussion with teaching faculty (see Table 10) and this reflects how much interaction took place.

There are distinct patterns of interaction: International College students report the most interactions outside of class for purposes of seeking academic help, although the Thai students are not far behind. On the other hand, there was also a substantial group of international students who seemingly avoided contact, presumably because of English language skills. The Chinese students reported having the least contact with faculty outside the classroom whether for general discussion or to seek help. Table 11 details how many students formed a new idea by seeking to understand the material through discourse. Notably, all three groups had a little variation, which was not significant. Table 12 shows how students perceive that classes included diverse perspectives. Surprisingly, Thai students rated highest, despite an assumption that there is authority adherence (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2021a, 2021b).

What was interesting is that the difference described above was at a statistically significant level. Table 13 offers an NSSE question in which students are asked if they tried to better understand someone else’s views by imagining how an issue looks from their perspective, i.e. a question about empathy. All three groups indicated that this happened “very often” and “often” in their classes, but there was no significant difference between the groups. Table 14 asks whether they have had discussions with people of a different race, or ethnicity. The International College students had the highest rating on this, which is not surprising given the multinational student body. This was followed by the Chinese, and Thai; 16.7% of the Thai students said that they never

Table 8 During the current school year, how often have you asked questions or contributed to course discussion in other ways (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 5 (7.8) | 12 (10.6) | 7 (5.5) | 24 |
| % Within column | 0.1 | 0.17 | 0.19 | 0.15 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 19 (24.8) | 31 (33.6) | 26 (17.5) | 76 |
| % Within column | 0.39 | 0.28 | 0.72 | 0.42 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 25 (24.8) | 24 (21.7) | 0 (11.3) | 49 |
| % Within column | 0.49 | 0.35 | 0 | 0.31 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 2 (2.3) | 2 (3.1) | 3 (1.6) | 7 |
| % Within column | 0.02 | 0.09 | 0.11 | 0.07 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 69 | 36 | 156 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 33.796, df = 6, Significance 0.000 (two tailed). MD = 23.

Table 9 Do you memorise course materials (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 4 (7.5) | 10 (10.3) | 9 (5.3) | 23 |
| % Within column | 0.08 | 0.14 | 0.25 | 0.15 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 20 (21.1) | 27 (29.0) | 18 (14.9) | 65 |
| % Within column | 0.39 | 0.39 | 0.5 | 0.41 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 22 (19.2) | 28 (26.3) | 9 (13.5) | 59 |
| % Within column | 0.43 | 0.4 | 0.25 | 0.38 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 5 (3.2) | 5 (4.5) | 0 (2.3) | 10 |
| % Within column | 0.1 | 0.07 | 0 | 0.06 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 70 | 36 | 157 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 10.436, df = 6, Significance 0.107 (two tailed). MD = 22.

had a discussion with a member of another race or ethnicity, and a similar number said that they had such discussions. University A is populated by Thai, International and Chinese people more so than other Thai provincial cities, we remark.

Table 15 asks students if they have had discussions with people of a different economic background. Most students from all three groups indicated that they had, but curiously there was no significant difference between the three groups. Table 16 asks students if they have had discussions with others who have different political beliefs; this, again, was a tricky question in Thailand in 2018, when political gatherings were restricted. In this context, the International students reported having political discussions “very often” reflecting upbringings and frank expression of political speech. This is in contrast to students from China, and even Thailand where certain types of political speech have, in recent years, resulted in visits from the police, and even arrest. However, when the two categories “very often,” and “often” were combined, the Thai students had the highest rate; a foreshadowing of what became a polarised political election in 2019 at the end of 5 years of military junta rule, perhaps, that grew into a protest movement that emerged in social media, spilled out onto the streets and continues as of 2022 led largely

Table 10 Have you ever discussed your academic performance with a faculty member (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 3 (2.3) | 3 (3.1) | 1 (1.5) | 7 |
| % Within column | 0.06 | 0.04 | 0.03 | 0.05 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 4 (9.6) | 16 (13.0) | 9 (6.4) | 29 |
| % Within column | 0.08 | 0.23 | 0.26 | 0.19 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 24 (23.8) | 30 (32.3) | 18 (15.9) | 72 |
| % Within column | 0.47 | 0.44 | 0.51 | 0.47 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 20 (15.2) | 20 (20.6) | 6 (10.2) | 46 |
| % Within column | 0.39 | 0.29 | 0.17 | 0.3 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 69 | 35 | 154 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 9.066, df = 6, Significance 0.170 (two-tailed). MD = 25.

by students and young people within Thailand (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2022).

In each table (see Tables 5–17), one (NSSE) question is presented. Data aligned to questions is arranged in cells that include observed counts, and in parentheses the expected counts, if distributions are random concerning Chinese, International, and Thai status. Furthermore, % within a given cell is representative of the percentage of observed counts, per column. Together, these offer views about how the three groups view Thai higher education, and how those views adjust in the context of the multi-national International College study. Chinese and International College students were multilingual; yet, in the context of the informal relationships, the International College students (many from Asia) defaulted to English, while the Chinese to Chinese and the Thai to Thai. Perhaps the most interesting identity issues were found in the Thai and Chinese students in the International College. Many such students were near-fluent in English, which made it easier for them to associate with others in that language. This affected their interactions, dialogues and receptive discourses, as shown in Table 5.

Echoing our findings of political views, International College students were most likely to report conversations with students of different religions (see Table 17). This perhaps reflects the diverse origins of the International College students, and also the nature of the curriculum at University A, which, at its base, is a Christian-sponsored University with a seminary, in a country that is overwhelmingly Buddhist. Among the Chinese students, we found there was slightly less awareness of issues of religious diversity and greater respect for the professional boundaries with their teachers, perhaps due to filial piety. This theme is discussed in an aligned paper which explores our samples cultural interaction through a different, smaller-subset of the NSSE data from our project and via Hofstede’s (2011) Cultural Compass; we formed an analysis to internationally equivalent evidence (see Waters and Day, 2022; Waters, 2019).

What we found in the tables, reflects this analysis of a different set of data drawn from the same study (Waters and Day, 2022). Namely, answers to questions about how students used their time across different activities, and engaged with their teachers outside of class, rather than within it, as is focused on in this article. Responses in our international students self-report show that many spend the most time preparing for class, whereas the Thai students spend the least. Thai students, as would be expected of domestic students, also work in jobs the most, and are most likely to be engaged in the community or involved with family care and

Table 11 Have you formed a new idea or understanding from various pieces of information (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very much | | | | |
| Count | 5 (5.9) | 9 (8.1) | 4 (4.0) | 18 |
| % Within column | 0.1 | 0.13 | 0.12 | 0.12 |
| Quite a bit | | | | |
| Count | 23 (24.5) | 35 (33.8) | 17 (16.7) | 75 |
| % Within column | 0.46 | 0.51 | 0.5 | 0.49 |
| Some | | | | |
| Count | 22 (18.6) | 22 (25.7) | 13 (12.7) | 57 |
| % Within column | 0.44 | 0.32 | 0.38 | 0.37 |
| Very little | | | | |
| Count | 0 (1.0) | 3 (1.4) | 0 (0.7) | 3 |
| % Within column | 0 | 0.04 | 0 | 0.02 |
| Total | | | | |
| Total | 50 | 69 | 34 | 153 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 5.175, df = 6, Significance 0.522 (two-tailed). MD = 23.

Table 13 Have you tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from their perspective (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 10 (12.8) | 17 (17.3) | 12 (9.0) | 39 |
| % Within column | 0.2 | 0.25 | 0.33 | 0.25 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 27 (24.2) | 28 (32.7) | 19 (17.1) | 74 |
| % Within column | 0.53 | 0.41 | 0.53 | 0.47 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 13 (13.4) | 23 (18.1) | 5 (9.5) | 41 |
| % Within column | 0.26 | 0.33 | 0.14 | 0.26 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 1 (0.7) | 1 (0.9) | 0 (0.5) | 2 |
| % Within column | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0 | 0.01 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 69 | 36 | 156 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 6.904, df = 6, Significance 0.330 (two-tailed). MD = 23.

Table 12 How often have diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnicity, gender, etc.) been included in course discussions or assignments (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 6 (7.5) | 12 (10.2) | 5 (5.3) | 23 |
| % Within column | 0.12 | 0.17 | 0.14 | 0.15 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 9 (12.1) | 13 (16.4) | 15 (8.5) | 37 |
| % Within column | 0.18 | 0.19 | 0.42 | 0.24 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 28 (26.2) | 36 (35.4) | 16 (18.5) | 80 |
| % Within column | 0.55 | 0.52 | 0.44 | 0.51 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 8 (5.2) | 8 (7.1) | 0 (3.7) | 16 |
| % Within column | 0.16 | 0.12 | 0 | 0.1 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 69 | 36 | 156 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 12.775, df = 6, Significance 0.047 (two tailed). MD = 23.

Table 14 During the current school year, how often have you had discussions with people of a different race or ethnicity (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 9 (15.1) | 25 (17.7) | 6 (9.2) | 40 |
| % Within column | 0.18 | 0.36 | 0.17 | 0.26 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 21 (16.7) | 21 (22.6) | 9 (11.8) | 51 |
| % Within column | 0.41 | 0.3 | 0.25 | 0.33 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 19 (17.0) | 18 (23.0) | 15 (12.0) | 52 |
| % Within column | 0.37 | 0.26 | 0.42 | 0.33 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 2 (4.3) | 5 (5.8) | 6 (3.0) | 13 |
| % Within column | 0.04 | 0.07 | 0.17 | 0.08 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 69 | 36 | 156 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 13.664, df = 6, Significance 0.034 (two-tailed). MD = 23.

responsibility (Waters and Day, 2022). In examining this data, we see an interesting case study of emergent behaviour and inter-cultural interaction between students of different nationalities in a Thai university context. What is unique, of course, is that this study was conducted immediately before a period of significant social transformation amongst young people in Thailand. As outlined in our methodology, we sought to use this article to disseminate our findings rather than leave them in an unpublished project report. We were also aware of a need to diversify our research process, so have sought to form an analysis of a portion of follow-up interviews conducted with participants who completed the survey. This mixed-method seeks to add context to the analytical nature of the NSSE, enhancing the triangulation of our research whilst aiming to reduce the inherent vulnerabilities of entirely numerate instruments (Cohen et al., 2007).

Results and discussion of interview findings

Highlighted repeatedly in this analysis were were three key discussion areas then used to codify our handling of the interview data:

1. Cultural identity and languages
2. Ambitions and interactions.
3. Friendship and residence.

Overall, students in the International College are isolated socially from the other two groups of students, because of differences in scheduling, and the use of English. This generalisation applies less so to the Thai students in the international programme; many have dual-heritage backgrounds. In contrast, Chinese students live together and study together as a group. They are usually on the same schedule as the Thai students. Yet, we found in the Chinese group it was common for living arrangements to be with other Chinese students; there is a preference for cooking Chinese food, often in their dorm rooms! Most unusual were the views of Chinese students in the International College, for example, Singapore-Chinese, International Student, Male provided answers highlighting that despite being Chinese-descended:

“...English is my first language. Similar for my brother, but my brother’s not that good at Mandarin. But English is our

Table 15 During the current school year, how often have you had discussions with people from a different economic background than you (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 15 (15.5) | 23 (20.6) | 9 (10.9) | 47 |
| % Within column | 0.29 | 0.34 | 0.25 | 0.3 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 23 (16.1) | 16 (21.5) | 10 (11.4) | 49 |
| % Within column | 0.45 | 0.24 | 0.28 | 0.32 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 13 (17.4) | 25 (23.3) | 15 (12.3) | 53 |
| % Within column | 0.26 | 0.37 | 0.42 | 0.34 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 0 (2.0) | 4 (2.6) | 2 (1.4) | 6 |
| % Within column | 0 | 0.06 | 0.06 | 0.04 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 68 | 36 | 155 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 9.930, df = 6, Significance 0.128 (two-tailed). MD = 24.

Table 17 During the current school year how often have you had discussion with people from different religions than yourself (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 10 (13.8) | 27 (18.4) | 5 (9.8) | 42 |
| % Within column | 0.2 | 0.4 | 0.14 | 0.27 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 14 (12.2) | 10 (16.2) | 13 (8.6) | 37 |
| % Within column | 0.28 | 0.15 | 0.36 | 0.24 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 25 (22.7) | 28 (30.3) | 16 (8.6) | 69 |
| % Within column | 0.49 | 0.41 | 0.44 | 0.45 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 2 (2.3) | 3 (3.1) | 2 (1.6) | 7 |
| % Within column | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.05 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 68 | 36 | 155 |
| % Within column | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

Pearson Chi-square 12.820, df = 6, Significance 0.046 (two-tailed). MD = 24.

Table 16 During the current school year how often have you had discussion with people from different political beliefs than you (NSSE)?

| | Chinese | International | Thai | Total |
|-----------------|-----------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Very often | | | | |
| Count | 6 (10.2) | 21 (13.6) | 4 (7.2) | 31 |
| % Within column | 0.12 | 0.31 | 0.11 | 0.2 |
| Often | | | | |
| Count | 22 (17.1) | 14 (22.8) | 16 (12.1) | 52 |
| % Within column | 0.43 | 0.21 | 0.44 | 0.34 |
| Sometimes | | | | |
| Count | 21 (20.4) | 25 (27.2) | 16 (14.4) | 62 |
| % Within column | 0.41 | 0.37 | 0.44 | 0.4 |
| Never | | | | |
| Count | 2 (3.3) | 8 (4.4) | 0 (2.3) | 10 |
| % Within column | 0.04 | 0.12 | 0 | 0.07 |
| Total | | | | |
| Count | 51 | 68 | 36 | 155 |

Pearson Chi-square 19.432, df = 6, Significance 0.003 (two-tailed). MD = 24.

main one. It's our main language. But my mom doesn't like it [at home] they have their own version of English".

This suggests an intrinsic multicultural mosaic present in the home that extended into the classroom and university as a whole for this particular student (Waters and Day, 2022). Likewise, the student felt that there would be assumptions made about their identity and interactions because they 'looked' Asian and thus they reported that:

"Thai people definitely have... a hierarchy of like people you should respect. And they do respect like the higher-ups with, like with those words that... polite words. Unlike in English, they, English don't really have that. I mean, you still can.. you can rephrase you words, sentence to make it more polite, but it's not in the same way. You can't just add a word at the end of an English sentence to make it more polite".

For this student, learning Thai was not intrinsic to their long-term ambitions, nor seen as useful to friendship or residence.

Yet, they saw multiculturalism and English as intrinsically vital, thus needed for:

"...socialising with other people from different countries. Cause [at home], well at least in the past, there weren't many foreigners... but now you have, I mean I haven't gone back for quite a while, but now you have like a lot of foreigners. Chinese people, Americans, English people... from everywhere...".

This was echoed across feedback from International Students and can be seen in the (NSSE) data. However in the Chinese cohort, we found differences. These students more strongly asserted the importance of national cultural heritage and made more effort to respect the heritage of Thailand and the university. For example, Chinese, Thai Major Student, Male, A noted that they:

"...don't usually ask to hang out, but I would like to (have) company with my friends. Sometimes, I write songs in my dorm." yet they would try to "...speak Thai all the time...".

Knox (2019) has suggested that different forms of English were taking shape in Asia due to it being the commonplace ASEAN language, yet each version was different and influenced by the regional background of the speaker. Despite widely situated language skills, Chinese, Thai Major Student, Male, A informed their interviewer that they spent the most time with "...Chinese friends..." but would prefer "...to involve myself into a international situation". This may have much to do with the student's residency, as they rented "...a condo with kitchen, so I cook by myself" and this impacted the way they made plans.

However, whilst International Students had objectives, ambitions for earning, careers and interactions, this Chinese student felt that they did not "...have a clear plan yet. I've tried many time but failed so I would like to gain more knowledge and let's see what would happen in the future..." and were resistant to answering what they expected to do in the future, replying that it was "...too early to talk about this question. I may continue next question...". This may have to do with the fact that the student seemed to imply their family had quality-concerns about education and degree authenticity/value in Thailand, not uncommon (Lao, 2015). The student reported that their parents:

“...didn’t allow me to come to Thailand for the first time because they can send me to some elsewhere that has a better education quality, but I insisted to come and they agreed finally. For now, they support [me with] my tuition fee”.

We found particularly interesting data to support that students of a Thai dual nationality had a challenging time integrating and were did not see themselves as “truly Thai” when engaged in discussions with others who were “fully Thai” and as American-Thai International Student, Male A remarked “I mean some Thai people understood I just look Thai on the outside but I’m actually American. So some Thai people, they understood me, but then some don’t. Most don’t”. Yet, asked if students felt like a world citizen, one Thai, International Student, Female, A remarked:

“I don’t really think about that. I think more about community that I’m getting along with. So the friends, the close friend that I have, I have a strong connection and relation with them and I consider them as like part of my life. Even like we, even we didn’t live together, hang out together, but its more about we feeling trust them. That’s why, that’s how like I feel, that I have a strong bond with them. But with Thai people, Thai-Thai people, I feel like a bit different. And they, they not... Its not that they don’t care, they just happy what they are. They happy to think like this, that’s it, done! So I would say OK; because, like, we have different thoughts so its OK. But you never think about, ‘oh I don’t belong to the Thai, I don’t belong to the foreigners,’ or I feel more belong base more on relationships. But those question is kinda general so... I don’t belong to them at all”.

It was interesting to note that students who were from other countries in Southeast Asia, or Thai ethnic minorities, reported a similar kind of feeling. Thai-Karen International Student, Female B noted that they felt more “...Karen. Yeah. More than I’m Thai. Cause I know that my parents are not Thai but because they have Thai ID, yeah, so we become Thai...but I know I was born in Thailand right...”. Prior experience was vital to determining identity in the university, more than their experiences as students assimilated into any Thai identity intrinsic to a university in Thailand. As Singaporean, International Student, Male remarked, they stayed:

“...away from from like non-Asians cause, like the people of my previous high school, they were, they were pretty like you know what, those kind of boys that do a lot of bad stuff. Illegal stuff. So I kind of, I say away from them. I think my group of friends just, you know, they just happen to be Japanese, Korean, Chinese”.

Yet, for at least one student, the similarities between language dialects played an equal role in shaping their educational decisions. Chinese, Thai Major Student, Female, A came from the Dai minority, southern China and her family had to:

“...persuade me to come and then I agreed. After being here, I realised that things were not bad as I thought. I don’t have any trouble in languages as Dai dialect is common with Thai language so that I can make friends easily here. I know noticed that Lanna Language [i.e. the northern dialect of Thai] is quite similar with ancient Dai dialect [in southern China], and even my father knows Lanna language”.

This may have to do with this Chinese student having connections with “...one Ajarn at a local university, but I’m not interested in that college due to inconvenient transportation and

unreasonable subject arrangement. Then, I heard from my friend that University A has Thai Department so I transferred here.” At the same time the medium of instruction, English, and its norms, created issues of assimilation for Thai students from non-domestic backgrounds, as Thai, International Student, Female, B noted:

“...in English culture we, the tone its completely different. Its not dynamic like Thai, so I kinda have to control my tone voice. Because when I saw people older than me, but I want to call them pi [elder sibling], you know like pi, but they would not understand because they’re different, you know. Like they’re not Thai... the word pi, for example, its showing like we respect them because they older. But when I used to people doesn’t have this Thai culture background, for me I kinda have a hard time. Like oh, I want to call them pi, to show them my respect, but I don’t know how. Because there’s no English word...”.

However, intriguingly this did not change their overall social interaction, or residency, as the student spent most of their time with other Chinese students, remarking “...all of them are Chinese...” concerning their friends, who they ate food with. This student mostly socialised with “...two room-mates...” because all three-spoke:

“...Yun’nan dialect, and sometimes we speak Mandarin... not many chances to connect with friends from other countries because Chinese students are majorities in my department. Once, I spoke Dai dialect to Thai friends and they even understood what I said. That was really amazing but... routine strictly, going to class every day, staying in the dorm and reading books. Every day repeats again and again. The most important reason for coming here is because I want to change my life instead of being the person like my friends. In Dai tradition, women get married at an early age, around 16 years old, but I don’t appreciate that kind of life”.

Seeking such independence, then, was a common feature across all students engaged in the university, perhaps a reflection of the fact that it draws together so many students of different nationalities in a more open atmosphere that is not wholly Thai, nor marketed as such externally. Despite showing independence Chinese, Thai Major Student, Female, A likewise struggled to articulate plans, other than to state that they did not want to “... stay at Xi-Shuangbanna [i.e. the autonomous area in southern China for the Tai-speaking people]. Let’s think about it later.” Some students, however, reflected entrepreneurial efforts to support their studies, which included Chinese, Thai Major* Student, Female, B running a business on the side of their studies, remarking they and their parents:

“...go half and half. I make money for exporting goods from Thailand to China so I can pay tuition by myself. My parents are saving money for my future, such as my wedding. Besides, I feel a little bit guilty asking money from my parents as this age”.

Chinese, Thai Major Student, Male, B again reported when asked if they considered themselves an international citizen of the world they replied that they felt:

“...part of the Chinese group as we share the same cultures and languages. There are few obstacles... to Chinese people so that’s why Chinese people would gather in a small group. Also, I’m proud of being a Chinese citizen. If someday wars happened, I am sure that I will do something for my country”.

This echoed a high level of masculinity reported across Chinese students in data collected from the Chinese students at University A during this study, gathered using Hofstede's Culture Compass (Waters and Day, 2022). Chinese, Thai Major Student, Male, B also remarked an idea is prevalent in their aims for the future, such as:

"...to buy a luxury sports car, such as McLaren and Lamborghini when I come to 30 years old... I hope to find a job that offers a high salary. I expect to have 30,000 (Yuan) incomes per month. Perhaps, I would start my own business, e.g. a chain hot-pot restaurants".

Present, then, across both forms of data is that Thai, International, and Chinese students do see Thai HE differently, as a result of expectations brought from China, overseas and particularly expectations created by international exposure, which includes the unusual context of the International College and heritage of the university. Similarities revealed by the (NSSE) were present in memory study habits, attitudes toward faculty, participation in class and overall interactions alongside engagement. There were interesting differences in how students reported using their time, attitudes toward each other and participation in class. International College students were more internationally minded and acutely focused on issues of identity, direction and opinion, in ways that the majority Thai, or even, Chinese students were not.

An exception was the English-speaking Thai students in the International College who were acutely aware of differences: with one Thai, International Student, Female, B contrasting herself as apart from her nationality, referring to what is commonly referred to as *Thai-Thai* noted anecdotally to describe those of Thai descent most closely aligned with the national identity of Thailand, a suggestive doubling of Thainess that tracks against the multi-national heritage of University A, and even the larger world of modern Thailand. Consequently, this highlights a diverse student body all with different motivations, practices and professional forces influencing their decision-making and learning experience; when we look beyond the Thai setting, we find a student experience that is often led, first and foremost, by the student, encouraged under critical self-driven learning. In the Thai setting, we find sociopolitical influence over individual learning, which uniquely reshapes the learning ecology!

Conclusion

What became clear, then, through our investigation is that students resist efforts to culturally assimilate their identities and as such the Thai *Menschenbild* was not wholly effective in reshaping their identity, or learning ideology. This is an interesting conclusion and was supported in our study data given the diversity and extent of how each group are different. Within Thai HE considerable emphasis is placed on ideological conformity of the learner, and as such we expected far closer similarities to be found regardless of nationality because an essential part of Thai HE is to conform students to being loyal, supportive and nationalist residents of Thailand—something many were not, as evident in the 2020-2022 Thai student protests (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2022). Behind differences, of course, was the recurring language and culture as intrinsic to student identity; circles of friends and study partners in patterns with little sample overlap despite sharing the same campus, but sometimes not the same classroom building!

Consequently, this paper presents data from two methods used in a significant empirical study of three groups of students at University A, demonstrating how each group can be analysed using (NSSE) and qualitative interview research methods. Our findings suggest that the three groups were different in how they

viewed classroom behaviour, interactions with teachers, being global citizens, long term ambitions, and attitudes toward careers. In brief, they brought, or perhaps retained against nationalist assimilation attempts, culturally and geographically grounded Thai *Menschenbild*. We set out to consider the following two hypotheses within the sifting and analysis of our data:

1. The Thai education system has created a particular *habitus* rooted in a Thai *Menschenbild*, which is embedded in Thai universities and would create an impact on engagement, shaping the other 30 nationalities we found in the International College.
2. There will be variations in student engagement based on the assumptions that students bring with cultural nuances from their home countries, or brings to University A, i.e. a *Menschenbild* that resists Thai norms.

It seems, based on both the evidence of the (NSSE) and insight highlighted briefly from a range of interviews, that Thai HE has not necessarily created a *habitus* successfully rooted in a Thai *Menschenbild*; as such, Thainess seemed to offer little impact on engagement, attitude or orientation in the two groups of foreign students, so Chinese and International Students, for whom issues of identity were salient, resistant and retained. We likewise confirmed variations in student engagement and perception of identity, based on the assumptions that students bring with them, cultural nuances from their home countries, a *Menschenbild* resisting Thai norms, or nature. Instead, their prior *Menschenbild* is reinforced by the partnerships and relationships formed both in the classroom and through what was, often, a shared residence and regional dialect language. For example, Chinese students were typically trapped between a need to deal with both Thai and English language situations, especially in a Thai major course.

As echoed by Lao (2015), there are emerging debates about the relevance and usefulness of Thai HE as a curriculum provider; many courses are seen to be borrowed from outdated ideas found in other educational systems, or brought back by academics who went overseas to study in other countries and, as such, are less about policy and more about professional practice, hence unique and variable in efficiency. As our data shows, it raises queries about whether the curriculum provision and purpose, given that cultural melting is a clear intent of the Thai *Menschenbild* and thus Thai HE curriculum, is sufficiently robust. Indeed, within this context, we need to engage further study as to what, exactly, in the digital era a robust socio-technical curriculum looks like, given traditional emphasis in Thai HE to create knowledge silos through strictly regulated departments and curriculums approved at a ministry-level that do not lend well to developments towards interdisciplinary practice (Day and Skulsuthavong, 2019; 2021a).

As we look at other similar studies, such as Ferguson (2021), we can find evidence that some Thai universities have been able to move towards creating a 'signature' international learning experience that has potential to move a university beyond traditional, or even rural, heritage. For Thai students in University A, we found less evidence of an international mindset; Thai students, mixed less with international students. Perhaps too in part due to a dominant nationalist school curriculum, were unaware or failed to remark on global citizenship, in the way that international students did. This begs a question about the effectiveness at a curriculum level to balance the intercultural and mosaic implications of widening global education through international programmes in Thailand, at least insofar as the context of the university we studied. We are not the first to note, as likewise echoed in Lao (2015), that everything outside the Thai emphasis is often bolted on, as a voluntary opportunistic gesture towards incorporating students as guests of the university, rather than international agents who raise the profile of the university and widen its reputation via enrichment of the

curriculum, and alumni dissemination post-graduation. The concept of the international student as ‘other’ is much echoed throughout other aspects of international migrant life within Thailand and, to this end, offers a tangible future direction for research: narrowing the intercultural gap within Thai HE, by better understanding how to bring together both Thai and non-Thai learners, as well as academics, towards progress and promotion of the university itself, is vital.

Conclusively, our data suggested that there are separate “Menschenbild” identities separating classroom behaviour for the Thai and Chinese students in particular, whilst international students exist as a shadow, as it were, of the university as a whole. Noticed, but not necessarily seen as a necessity in an increasingly competitive university market. This is more defined for these groups, yet still distinctive despite sharing a common setting: an international university, run by Thais in Thailand. Naturally, this raises questions about how we educate in a multicultural, engaging, yet sympathetic way. The International College students, however, were different. They came from across multiple countries, and despite this difference, developed a common world-citizen culture stretched across nationalities, reshaping even Thai international students along the way. This did not happen with the Chinese students studying in the Thai language, which raises interesting questions about how Thai HE can develop practical policies for cultural integration. It did not also happen because of core curriculum, pedagogy or academic practice; rather, the intrinsic nomadic aspect of student life drew such students together and they formed bonds, quite literally as ‘the other’ within the university. Because of this, it created tensions for some students, whilst highlighting an area of future development for Thai universities. So, how to encourage intercultural development that allows such international students to graduate as sympathetic alumni proud of their accomplishments and keen to direct others into their pathway of study. These are priorities to be addressed in future of Thai educational policy, as Thailand increasingly seeks globally align their systems of education, and does so still hoping to retain a unique flavour of Thai national identity. Something that, as of 2022, is changing rapidly in the face of global education and empowerment through technology, creating new implications for cross-cultural university programmes and learning styles.

Data availability

The datasets can be provided by the authors on reasonable request.

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Author contributions

The authors identify an equal contribution in the creation of this article.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

A research approval process was via an internal committee during a grant award process that supervised the project applied for by TW.

Informed consent

Informed oral consent was sourced from those engaged in the original study and was supervised by TW.

Additional information

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