

Josef Ploner¹, Craig Wheway²

¹University of Hull, UK, ²Rajabhat Maha Sarakham University, Thailand

Abstract

Drawing on a 'glonacal' (global + national + local) heuristic of the complex and synchronous dimensionality of higher education in the 21st century (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002), this contribution seeks to identify some key characteristics and challenges universities in Thailand and the UK face today. Highlighting some shared trends and features (for example, focus on science education, internationalisation strategies, quality assurance, regional engagement), and considering the neoliberal forces which engulf the development of higher education in both countries, we argue that the ways in which knowledge production takes place in both countries, requires finely-tuned instruments accounting for the mutually constituting local, regional, national and global elements at play.

Outline

Knowledge production is a well-researched area of contemporary higher education (Moravec, 2008; Olssen & Peters, 2005). In this paper, we examine the interplay between politics and knowledge production in higher education in Thailand and the UK. This paper also focuses on the impact of educational 'neoliberalism' with the introduction of new fee regimes both in the Thai and English context which has influenced the 'production' of knowledge in different ways. Within the Thai context, the introduction of fees has led to increases in student numbers but has been attributed to reduction in the quality of graduates. With the emergence of the ASEAN Union of Nations and the integration of many Southeast Asian universities into a socio-economic political bloc, Thailand is now competing with its immediate neighbours, specifically Vietnam and Malaysia.

Politics in the Thai context is a contentious issue in part due to the events of 2014 in which a military government was instilled without an election taking place. The impacts on Thai higher education are still difficult to gauge at this point, however, some of Thailand's brightest minds have been forced to remain silent or leave the country through fear of persecution due to political power being concentrated within vested 'elite' interests. Thailand has continued to promote the sciences as a means of dealing with the national problem of unskilled labour, which many national and multinational companies are reporting (Jimenez, Nguyen, & Patrinos, 2012). Nationalist doctrines pervade more deeply within the Rajabhat universities (these are equivalent to the former polytechnic universities in the UK context) where knowledge is generally produced to serve local needs rather than national and international goals.

This paper also considers the regional political environment which affects knowledge production. Local universities in a Thai context suffer from competing pressures in terms of their knowledge production. Similarly to the Minzu universities in China (Montgomery and Wang), Rajabhat universities have to engage in projects relating to the communities in which they serve. Yet Rajabhat universities also face pressures to globalise and enter into international rankings, produce academic journal outputs and promote internationalisation. The paper highlights some key statistics in this regard; in many cases, less than 20% of Rajabhat lecturers sampled in three Northeast Thai Rajabhat universities had PhD degrees and many of these are awarded by the universities themselves with little or no oversight on the quality of the final thesis (Atthakorn, 2013). The aforementioned points serve to highlight that knowledge production is not specific to a nation state, but differs within individual higher education systems.

Whilst the higher education landscape of Thailand may appear very different from that of the UK, the latter has faced equally significant recent changes which impact on the ways knowledge is produced both at local and national levels. Home to some of the most prestigious universities in the world, and providing teaching in a global language, the UK has emerged as a global leader in international student recruitment. There are clear financial incentives to attracting international students and the issue of neo-liberal 'marketisation' of HE in the UK towards an international student market has been heavily discussed and criticized (Brown & Carasso, 2013). Despite this critique, subject areas have academically profited from the intake of international talent and sought to internationalise their curricula so as to engage meaningfully with increasing numbers of international students. Nevertheless, the ways in which knowledge is (co-)produced in such culturally diverse HE environments heavily depends on disciplinary contexts and requires further exploration.

A striking parallel between current developments between Thai and UK higher education is the increased focus of supporting STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects as opposed to humanities and social science programmes. Similar to Thailand, which seeks to tackle the problem of unskilled labour through enhanced science education, the UK conservative government continues to promote science education as a key driver for economic growth, particularly in view of emerging high-tech industries, which require highly qualified and skilled graduates (Lords Select Committee, 2012). The unprecedented promotion of STEM subjects in UK higher education has also to be viewed as an economically-motivated reaction to keep up with the high standards of science education in emerging economies such as China, India and Mexico.

While such national strategies are tightly interwoven with the global demands of knowledge and skills production, UK HE, like Thailand, is witnessing significant changes on local and regional levels. Amplified by the hotly contested Scottish Referendum in 2014, re-emerging debates on English regionalism and a widening 'North-South Divide', these changes are propelled by political actors who call for more political and economic powers for the North of England. Northern Universities in Leeds, Hull, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield make tremendous contributions to the economies of their city regions and, through long-established strategies of internationalisation, aim to enrich the cultural and cosmopolitan fabric of these historically white working class environments. The role of these universities in contributing to an economically thriving 'Northern Powerhouse', a frequently used term in current political rhetoric, is continually gaining ground and raises important questions regarding the future of knowledge production occurring between the local and global contexts in which universities operate today.

In line with a 'glonacal' (global + national + local, Marginson and Rhoades, 2002) heuristic of the complex and synchronous dimensionality of higher education in the 21st century, this contribution seeks to identify some key characteristics and challenges universities in Thailand and the UK share today. In view of the neoliberal forces which engulf and determine the current and future development of higher education in both countries, the paper argues that the ways in which knowledge production takes place and becomes institutionalised requires finely-tuned instruments accounting for the mutually interacting local, regional, national and global elements at play. Thus, we argue that knowledge production should be 'differentialised' something which global rankings and international comparisons largely fail to acknowledge.

References

- Atthakorn, S. (2013). Factors affecting human resource development of Rajabhat University Lecturers in the North-East Region of Thailand. National Institute of Development Administration.
- Brown, R., & Carasso, H. (2013). *Everything for sale? The marketisation of UK higher education*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge.

- Jimenez, E., Nguyen, V., & Patrinos, H. A. (2012). Stuck in the Middle? Human Capital Development and Economic Growth in Malaysia and Thailand. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 6283.
- Lords Select Committee (2012) UK must produce more high calibre science graduates to secure economic growth (Online) <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/science-and-technology-sub-committee-i/news/stem-report-published/> (accessed 25.06.2015)
- Marginson, S. and Rhoades, G. (2002) Beyond National States, Markets, and Systems of Higher Education: A Glonacal Agency Heuristic. *Higher Education*, 43(3), 281-309.
- Moravec, J. W. (2008). A new paradigm of knowledge production in higher education. *On the Horizon*, 16(3), 123-136. doi: doi:10.1108/10748120810901422
- Olssen, M., & Peters, M. A. (2005). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: from the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(3), 313-345. doi: 10.1080/02680930500108718