

## A Comparative Study on the Learning Experiences and Learning Style Preferences of Thai and British Postgraduate Students at a United Kingdom University

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### Abstract

As a consequence of globalisation, higher education in the United Kingdom has witnessed an increased demand in international education at the postgraduate level among foreign and domestic students. This research compares learning experiences and learning style preferences among Thai and British postgraduate students in the United Kingdom. Respondents included three British and three Thai Master's students who began their studies in September 2011. Data were collected through semi-structure interviews conducted in English and Thai as appropriate. The findings demonstrate that learning experiences and learning style preferences differ between British and Thai students; and the cultural background of the interviewees influenced their learning styles, preferences and experiences at the university. Independent learning was disclosed as the most significant skill characterised by British participants, and this attribute was acquired from their educational background. In contrast, the study found that Thai participants were lacking in this area, and this was attributed to Thai culture, which values teachers as the centre of the class (i.e., a teacher-oriented classroom). Therein, Thai participants were not akin to individual learning practices and focused their attention mainly on the information presented in the classroom. As a result, preparing individual assignments were new and challenging experiences for Thai students. Implications of the study indicate the need for improved UK postgraduate provisions in order to better understand the learning styles and needs of students from the two nations included in this study. The research suggests that learning environments and students' learning styles can adapt according to the needs and preferences of universities and students alike.

**Keywords:** learning preferences, learning experiences, university in United Kingdom, culture

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## การศึกษาเปรียบเทียบประสบการณ์และรูปแบบความชอบในการเรียน ของนักศึกษาระดับบัณฑิตศึกษาชาวไทยและชาวอังกฤษ ของมหาวิทยาลัยในสหราชอาณาจักร

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### บทคัดย่อ

ผลจากโลกาภิวัตน์ ทำให้ผู้เรียนชาวต่างชาติและชาวอังกฤษมีความต้องการศึกษาต่อระดับปริญญาโทหลักสูตรนานาชาติในการศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาของสหราชอาณาจักรเพิ่มขึ้น งานวิจัยนี้เปรียบเทียบประสบการณ์ในการเรียนและความชอบต่อรูปแบบการเรียนระหว่างผู้เรียนชาวไทยและผู้เรียนชาวอังกฤษในหลักสูตรปริญญาโทของสหราชอาณาจักร ผู้ให้ข้อมูลการสัมภาษณ์ประกอบด้วยนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาโทชาวไทยและชาวอังกฤษชาติละ 3 คนที่กำลังศึกษาอยู่ในเดือนกันยายน ค.ศ. 2011 โดยใช้การสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างเป็นภาษาอังกฤษและภาษาไทย ผลของการศึกษาพบว่าผู้เรียนชาวไทยและผู้เรียนชาวอังกฤษมีประสบการณ์เรียนและความชอบต่อรูปแบบการเรียนที่แตกต่างกันโดยวัฒนธรรมและค่านิยมทางสังคมมีผลต่อรูปแบบในการเรียน ความชื่นชอบและประสบการณ์ในมหาวิทยาลัย ทักษะการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเองเป็นสิ่งที่ผู้เรียนชาวอังกฤษมีความโดดเด่น ซึ่งทักษะนี้ได้รับมาจากการศึกษาในสถาบันการศึกษาของอังกฤษที่ผ่านมา ในทางตรงกันข้าม ผู้เรียนชาวไทยขาดทักษะด้านนี้ ซึ่งเป็นผลมาจากรูปแบบการสอนในชั้นเรียนของไทยที่เน้นไปที่ผู้สอนเป็นศูนย์กลาง ดังนั้นผู้เรียนชาวไทยจึงไม่คุ้นเคยกับการเรียนแบบพึ่งพาตนเองและจะเน้นไปที่ข้อมูลที่ได้รับจากห้องเรียนเท่านั้น จึงเป็นความท้าทายและเป็นสิ่งใหม่สำหรับผู้เรียนชาวไทยเมื่อได้รับการมอบหมายให้ทำรายงานที่ต้องคิดวิเคราะห์ด้วยตนเองเพียงลำพัง การศึกษาครั้งนี้มีนัยยะสำคัญสำหรับหน่วยงานด้านการศึกษาของสหราชอาณาจักรที่ช่วยให้เข้าใจรูปแบบการเรียนรู้ของทั้งสองชาติ ซึ่งงานวิจัยพบว่สิ่งแวดล้อมด้านการเรียนและรูปแบบการเรียนสามารถพัฒนาตามความต้องการและความชื่นชอบของมหาวิทยาลัยและผู้เรียนได้

**คำสำคัญ:** ความชอบในการเรียน ประสบการณ์ในการเรียน มหาวิทยาลัยในสหราชอาณาจักร วัฒนธรรม

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## Introduction

This research is based on Reangvaranont (2012)'s comparative study on learning experiences and learning style preferences of Thai and British postgraduate students at a United Kingdom university, which provides insight on the significance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in terms of business. The study serves to improve the understanding of national learning behaviours as vital implications which affect teaching methods in the heterogeneous classroom. In line with Patanathabutr (2008)'s social science research, this paper investigates suitable teaching methods and learning styles as an impetus to increasing the learners' satisfaction and lifelong learning and performance. Relative to business models, Holtbrügge and Berg (2009) assert that different learning style preferences should be considered when designing personnel development programs for foreign subsidiaries, and this suggests that learning styles and preferences can be transferred to business firms. Participants in this study are Thai and British students, and to ensure confidentiality the identities of students and the university have not been disclosed. Rather, research participants are identified as students 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, and the university will be identified as simply "British university" throughout this short paper.

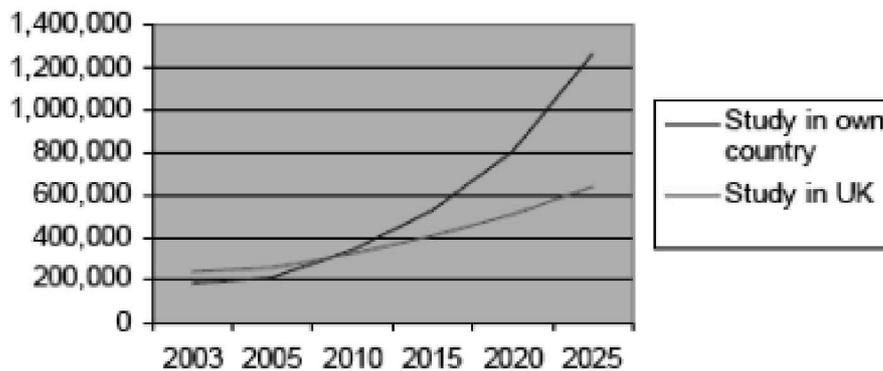
## Relevant Background

When placing learning preferences into a corporate perspective, Holtbrügge and Berg (2009) state that learning is not only important for the activities of organizations related to higher education, but also to an ever greater extent to business firms. Increasing internationalization requires firms to learn about the economic, political and cultural conditions in different countries and to train their employees accordingly (Holtbrügge & Berg, 2004). Equally important, the generation and transfer of knowledge within internationally operating firms has become one of the most important tasks for managers (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002). The increasing internationalization of firms means that workers become more culturally diverse and human resource development activities have to be adjusted to match the individuals' preferences if the respective measure is to be successful. For instance, many firms introduce global teams consisting of people with different cultural backgrounds in order to enhance creativity and to innovativeness (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). While differences in learning preferences are of direct relevance to firms, they are also important when considering that learning may not be confined to the employees of the firm. Rather, firms may have to ensure that alliance partners, buyers, suppliers, government agencies, and a whole range of other business partners and stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds learn about their products, services and organization in general. For example, distributors or sales agents may require training in order to sell a firm's product. Similarly, licensees need to be trained to use a firm's proprietary knowledge in a specific way, allowing all involved parties to maximize benefits from such agreements.

From the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) perspective, effective learning is a key to postgraduate provision and is therefore a major part of the business of HEIs in the UK and other countries. Comprehending the learning preferences of individuals from heterogeneous

cultural backgrounds is increasingly significance to higher education as well as for businesses. In the UK, the number of foreign students enrolled at various universities has increased over the last decade and this export of higher education services has become an important pillar for the country. Figure 1 and Table 1 provide the figures of foreign students coming to the UK for their higher education.

**Figure 1:** Global demands for UK Higher Education 2003-2025



*Y-axis indicates student numbers/ X-axis indicates year*  
 Source: British Council (2003)

**Table 1:** Top non-EU Sending Countries in UK Higher Education in Postgraduate Level

Top 10 non-EU senders	2010-11	2009-10
China (PRC)	67,325	56,990
India	39,090	38,500
Nigeria	17,585	16,680
United States of America	15,555	15,060
Malaysia	13,900	14,060
Hong Kong ( <u>Special</u> Administrative Region)	10,440	9,945
Saudi Arabia	10,270	8,340
Pakistan	10,185	9,815
Thailand	5,945	5,505
Canada	5,905	5,575

Source: UK Council of International Affairs, 2012

According to the UK Council of International Affairs (2012), there were increased numbers of Thai students enrolled into the UK higher education system from 2009-2011. These developments have led to a significant increase in the cultural heterogeneity of various university student bodies, thus challenging them in many ways. For example, they have to redesign learning support services and to modify curricula and teaching methods in order to enable all students to achieve their learning objectives. Understanding to what extent learning style preferences differ across students from different cultural backgrounds is thus of growing importance to universities and teachers whose part and parcel is to support individuals in their learning. For instance, a study by Gaspay and Legoretta (2009), which surveyed 1,617 students in the US in 2006, found that cultural background of learners significantly impacted distance learning (DL) effectiveness.

## Objectives of the Study

The objectives include increasing and comparing our understanding of the influences of national culture from Thai and British perspectives in terms of learning experiences and learning style preferences. The study seeks a postgraduate provision for universities and a proscriptive narrative for students prior to undertaking postgraduate level education.

## Research Questions

Research questions are framed in three areas: (1) What are the national learning style preferences of Thai and British postgraduate students, and what experience did they acquire at the British university. Were they similar or heterogeneous? (2) How do they adapt to the new educational environment at postgraduate level in terms of the difficulties that they encounter and as their cultural backgrounds influence their learning style preferences? (3) What can UK universities do to improve their courses, services, teaching methods, and advices to prospective students?

## Methods

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were implemented in this research. Silverman (1985) explains that the interview process is particularly good at producing data which is in-depth and adds detail to the topic; it also provides the opportunity to expand ideas and views towards the topic. Therefore, the interview was the main strategy employed in this case study because the research consideration is within human emotion and understanding. A questionnaire was not considered to be adequate in this study, given that individuals would find it difficult to answer the 'why' question as suggested by Leeuw (2003) (cited in Sassenburg, 2006). Patton (2002) notes that interviews are particularly suitable when collecting data from individuals with culturally-oriented learning behaviours.

Three British and three Thai Master's students were chosen based on convenience sampling. The British students were all males of 23, 24 and 25 years of age and studied business, computer engineering and media respectively. The Thai students included a 24-year-old female, and 25 and 31-year-old year old males who studied tourism, media, design engineering respectively.

As Campbell (2011) suggests, the reason for choosing a small sample size is that a small number of subjects is best implemented for narrative research given that the researcher has to explore each participant's personal experiences. This is confirmed by May (2012) who points out that samples of narrative analysis often tend to be relatively small. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes and was digitally recorded. The researcher used English for British students and Thai for Thai students. As the topic is relative to national culture, the interview process allowed the interviewees to be relaxed and able to provide their own feedback and extrapolation. Interviewees were allowed opportunities to discuss the questions and their answers alike. Clark et al. (2000) suggests that the researcher can strengthen open-ended questions by allowing longer answers and asking supplementary questions.

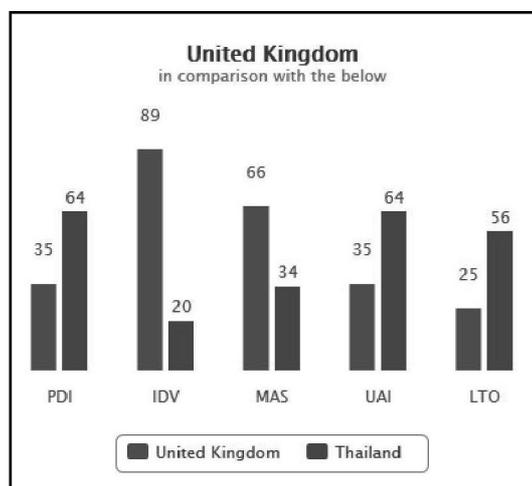
Once the interviews were recorded, they were interpreted carefully one by one and transcribed into the text. The data analysis technique used within this research is a thematic analysis, as suggested by Powell and Renner (2003) who point out that there are five steps in analysing narrative data. First, the data were examined by reviewing the recordings several times and re-reading the transcripts. Secondly, the analysis was focused by reviewing the purpose of the evaluation, through looking at how individuals respond to each question, and by exploring the connections and relationship between questions. Thirdly, categorising information (coding the data) was done by assigning abbreviated codes to organize them into categories. Fourthly, patterns and connections were identified within and between categories, capturing similarity or differences in people's response within a category. Subsequently, the study employed themes and connections to explain findings, including expectations, learning experiences, learning preferences and suggestions.

## Results and Discussion

The research identifies that the expectations of higher education are different for British and Thai participants. The British participants pointed out that their expectations of studying in higher education can be stated as *personal value* and they did not choose to have the degree because of social belief or to have higher status in the society; rather they desire to gain better knowledge and become professionals in their fields. Furthermore, they expect to have two-way-communication in the class, and to make connections with people in the same industry. Thus, the findings imply that individualism, as suggested by Hofstede (1986)'s theory, indicates that Britain is an individualist country where students focus on obtaining knowledge and education is seen as self-achievement. In contrast, Thai student expectations of studying in higher education can be stated as *social value*. Thai participants pointed out that they decided to embark on their degrees given that Thai society values higher education as vital and considering that most people follow the system of completing high school and continuing to university as a sign of social affluence. Hofstede (1986)'s theory of *collectivism* is relevant to Thai students as a group-oriented culture. For example, he suggested that in collectivist societies, certificates obtained at the end of a programme are highly valued, and students work hard to ensure that they get their degrees

-identifying education as a means of improving one's status in a society. For example, Table 2 presents Hofstede (2012)' comparison index between Thai and British, wherein: PDI = Power Distance; IDV = Individual versus collectivism; MAS = Masculinity versus Femininity; UAI = Uncertainty Avoidance; and LTO = Long-term Orientation.

**Table 2:** Hofstede's National Culture Dimensions of Thailand and the United Kingdom



Source: Hofstede, 2012

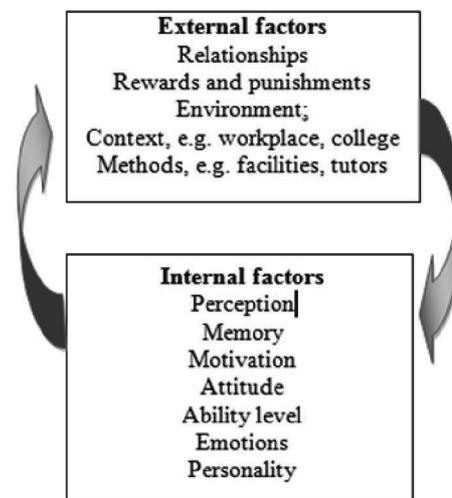
The study finds that the *learning experiences* of higher education between Thai and British students were entirely different. For British students, the environment was internationalized by having foreign students from different countries and having foreign teachers. The researchers found that British students demonstrated *critical thinking* practices due to their assignments, rather than their examinations. One of the well-known definitions of critical thinking was defined by Robert Ennis who noted that critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking which is focused on deciding what to believe or do (Norris & Ennis, 1989, cited in Fisher, 2001). Kurland (2000) explains that thinking critically infers relying on reason rather than emotion and requires evidence, and evidence should be followed as a methodology. Accordingly, the research found that British students were mostly concerned with finding the best explanation and asking relevant questions.

Regarding *learning style preferences*, the study finds that the British participants prefer independent learning as it empowers them to think freely and become self-reliable. Two-way-communication and passionate teachers are preferred for them. In contrast, Thai participants prefer to have examinations similar to those employed during their undergraduate studies, including mid-term and final examinations. All Thai participants agreed that by having examinations and assignments, it reduced personal stress regarding their overall course scores. The UK is generally considered to be an individualist country wherein individual understanding is highly significant and the education system encourages creativity of learners. In contrast, personal creativity is not encouraged in Thailand (Taylor, 1990)

where students tend to value memorization as a form of intelligence. Auyueng et al. (1996) pointed out that in collectivist countries, knowledge is seen as a commodity to be transferred from a teacher to a student and individual understanding of the student is not important. Thai student # 3 pointed out that "In Thailand, university measures student's achievement by using examination," and this is vastly different from British system.

British participants suggest that all British graduate students should prepare themselves by reading about the subjects in advance to prevent 'blinding' (i.e., performance without preparation, experience or knowledge). They suggest that international students should prepare their English language proficiency in order to tackle the writing requirements for assignments, the presentations, and for the reading of textbooks. Whereas Thai participants suggested that prospective Thai graduate students should find more information about what they are going to study, focus on the assessment details, practice analyzing and reading skills, and try to understand about British culture. Thai participants had to adjust their learning preference the from teacher-oriented style experienced during their undergraduate study to be more self-oriented in at the Master's level at British university (i.e., they transformed into independent learners ). The reasons behind this were not only the ways they were taught at British university but also the culture influences of the UK, such as individualism. As a result, the environment affected the learning preferences of individuals and indeed follow Mullins (2010)'s theoretical framework (see Table 3).

**Table 3:** Table 3. Mullins' Theoretical Framework



Source: Mullins, 2010

If Thai university administrators were to adjust their teaching environment according to the outcome of this research, critical thinking and independent learning skill could be transferred to Thai students. Thus the challenge to Thai education culture is to encourage Thai students to become an independent learners, rather than following collectivist values where the learner is directed by the teachers and social values are more significant than personal values. British student # 1 was critical of the Thai system: "I think that an examination does not represent someone's intelligence."

Regarding *learning experiences*, the research discovered that British participants were familiar with the international context from the time of their undergraduate degree. *Critical thinking skills* and *independent learning skills* were practiced regularly during their undergraduate degree through tackling assignments, and thus they have a *student-oriented* system. In contrast, *teacher-oriented* and *examination-based* education were most familiar to the Thai respondents. Additionally, the Thai participants were used to a mono-cultural classroom setting with one nationality in their classes. All three Thai participants had experienced a mono-cultural atmosphere during their undergraduate studies, even when lectures were given in English (i.e., a single nationality of students and teachers regardless of the language used). Nonetheless, English was a biggest challenge for Thai participants at the British university.

When accounting for *learning preferences*, the interviews revealed that British and Thai students had heterogenous preferences. Active teachers, independent learning and two-way-communication were favoured by British students (i.e., they looked for active teachers and classmates). In comparison, while Thai participants also preferred active lecturers and two-way-communication, they preferred to be self-directed learners and to have a fixed timetable. They are also more comfortable with examinations rather than assignments and avoid asking questions in the class.

## Conclusion

The research explored the differences in learning experiences and preferences of British and Thai postgraduate students at a British university. The study found that for British participants, *personal values* influences the way they perceive their degree whereas Thai participants, *social values* holds the greater influence. Cultural background was the key factor mentioned by all of the interviewees regarding the influences in the way they were previously educated, and therefore demonstrates Hofstede's (2012) *National Culture Dimensions* and explains how people in a given country behave in a certain way.

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