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Reconceptualizing the Notion of “Study” While Studying Abroad: International Students at a Thai University

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the academic experiences of 14 international students in Thailand and how these experiences reshape their concept of “study.” Findings from the interviews show that students modified the concept of study after encountering new experiences of teaching and learning, shifting from viewing learning as an individual, lecture-based activity to embracing a collaborative approach. This shift in subjective culture is reflected in material culture, underscoring how these cultural aspects reinforce one another. Overall, the findings challenge the conventional East–West academic culture dichotomy, revealing a blended approach that defies simplistic cultural divides. Additionally, it demonstrates the applicability of Huber and Reynolds’ (2014) model—which considers material, social and subjective aspects of culture—as a valuable framework for examining academic culture. Although small in scope, this study provides insights into students’ reconceptualization of “study” in the Southeast Asian context and offers a foundation for future research on academic culture.

Keywords: concepts of teaching and learning, academic culture, student mobility, Thailand, Southeast Asia

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One of the main goals of tertiary education is to equip students with the competencies to live in culturally diverse societies and communicate with individuals from various backgrounds. Studying abroad offers an excellent opportunity for students to engage with a different culture, enhance their intercultural competence, and experience living with others. While numerous studies have explored international students' challenges abroad (Gu & Maley, 2008; Gu et al., 2010; Gomez, 2020; Qu & Song, 2024), the factors that motivate them to study in another country (Khanh et al., 2024; Lee & Stewart, 2022) or their academic experience (Selvitopu, 2020) do not address whether, through immersion in another country, students' understanding of what it is to "study" evolves or how this potential reconceptualization influences their actions. This article begins to fill this gap by focusing on international students from both Europe and Asia in Thailand and their accounts of their experience studying in a Liberal Arts faculty. It describes how they manage the new experience and analyses, particularly their consequent changing concepts of "study".

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the number of internationally mobile students grew to more than 6 million by 2021, and Oduwaye et al. (2023) analyzed trends in research for that period, revealing that academic and sociocultural challenges are the most studied, with language difficulties as a key factor. Regarding academic challenges, several key factors were identified: varying teaching methods, differences in university curricula, and teachers' accents. Additionally, international students in non-English-speaking countries often face more pronounced language difficulties, advisor-related problems, academic stress and a lack of motivation. With respect to sociocultural challenges, this study highlights issues such as social living conditions, climate and environmental differences, unequal treatment, and language discrimination. The impact of language barriers and social experience further complicates social relationships between domestic and international students.

Beginning with the experience of Asian students in the West, the summary by Oduwaye et al. (2023) aligns with research that highlights academic and psychological struggles among Asian international students studying in contexts of "Western-style education", such as the UK, the U.S. or Australia. To analyze a case of Chinese students in Australia, Gu and Maley (2008), for example, used questionnaires from 163 students across various universities and employed interview methods with 13 Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students from 10 different institutions, with the findings complemented by semistructured interviews with lecturers. The results described the students' 'learning shock', i.e., "some unpleasant feelings and difficult experiences that the learners encounter when they are exposed to the new environment" (Gu & Maley, 2008, p. 229). They also reported psychological and physical struggles such as boredom, loneliness, alienation and food differences. This finding echoes that of Gomez's (2020) study, which reported that international students' limited skills in the English language led them to have limited numbers of friends and to feel isolated and not immersed in the new environment (see also Dai, 2019). Recently, Qu and Song (2024) observed and interviewed 24 Chinese students at an Australian university on their academic experience. The participants had difficulties understanding the concepts of critical thinking and the

student-centered approach and encountered language barriers. While the students questioned the teachers' stereotypical point of view toward Chinese students as being passive and not speaking up, the students believed that the curriculum did not include international perspectives or non-Western perspectives.

However, the survey article and example studies focus on the academic experiences of Asian students encountering the Western academic culture, but fewer studies explore the academic experience of foreign students in Asia, specifically in the Thai context, although Asia has become a destination for international students (Probert, 2023), with a shift from the South–North paradigm, from the center-periphery divide between the West and the Rest, to a more multipolar structure with emerging hubs in South Korea, Malaysia, India, the Gulf States and China (Xu, 2023).

China, in particular, has become a significant destination, especially for students from Asia and Africa, but this is not without problems. Wen et al. (2019) reported poor English proficiency among faculty and limited student–teacher interaction, particularly affecting students from Korea and Japan, and Agyenim-Boateng (2022) noted language barriers, limited engagement with Chinese lecturers, and subtle discriminatory treatment for Black African graduate students in Beijing. Research in Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia is developing. It focused initially on the push–pull factors that bring students to these areas, especially short-term programs (Hennings & Tanabe 2018; Lee & Stewart 2022; Khanh et al. 2021). More recent work has included analyses of students' experiences in situ, for example, Asian students in Indonesia (Irayanti et al. 2025) and African students in China (Umennadi et al. 2025).

With respect to Thailand, Pongsin et al. (2023) highlighted that the country is emerging as a new international hub for education, particularly for Asian students. Thailand's advantages as a study destination include low costs, strategic location, high-quality campus facilities, and a welcoming attitude toward international students, but challenges persist, particularly concerning inadequate English language proficiency. Rhein and Philipps (2022) explored two groups of American students who participated in a study abroad program at Mahidol University, Thailand, to explore the push and pull factors. The results echo those of Pongsin et al. (2023), who reported that Thailand's location, reputation for being a tourist destination, exoticness and students' need for novelty, but not academic reputation, are pull factors. Snodin (2019) explored the experiences of students not only from Western countries but also from countries in Africa and Asia. She identifies several pull factors, including scholarships, word-of-mouth referrals, geographical and cultural proximity, positive aspects related to strong relationships and research support, and negative aspects, notably language barriers and bureaucratic challenges. She notes a paradox in the internationalization of Thai higher education, where the push for modernity coexists with enduring traditionalism, creating challenges for the development of the sector. Research remains limited but includes the experiences of Chinese students in Thailand (Huang, 2021) and studies focusing on cultural and psychological adjustments (Rujiprak, 2016; Rujiprak & Limprasert, 2016) as well as perceptions and satisfaction with higher education services in Thailand (Chemsripong, 2021).

Beynon (2024) and Rattanaphumma and Visuttakul (2022) explore international students' academic experience, which significantly impacts their academic, linguistic, and intercultural development. Both studies identify linguistic challenges, which hinder

full integration into the local environment, although English, as the primary medium of instruction, facilitates improvements in students' communication skills and adaptability. These studies emphasize the importance of intercultural development, with European and Chinese students adjusting their behaviors to respect local customs, which fosters empathy and open-mindedness. Additionally, exposure to Thai cultural practices, particularly Buddhism, contributes to personal growth. Overall, both studies underscore the transformative potential of studying abroad, enhancing academic abilities while fostering significant personal growth and global awareness.

In general, the literature on Thailand focuses on how students respond to different modes of teaching and learning, the academic culture they find in their host university, and this article focuses more closely on the concept of academic culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining academic culture is essential to analyze students' experiences with the new academic environment. There is a lack of agreement on how to conceptualize academic culture. Pedraja-Rejas et al. (2022) reported that, in 74 studies, academic culture was interpreted in various ways. Starting from the broad definition of 'attitudes, beliefs, or values' (Yang, 2015), it is viewed as a process of academic acculturation, describing how individuals integrate into academic groups while contributing their own expertise and experiences (Jiang et al., 2010). It is also defined as discourses, norms and institutional practices that shape the daily work of university staff and members (Szélenyi & Rhoads, 2013) and as a dynamic process of meaning-making in the academic community (Böhm-Carrer & Lucero, 2018; Gómez Silva & da Silva Bezerra, 2018).

Another systematic review by Tikhonova et al. (2023) looks at the problem of defining 'academic culture' by analyzing sources available from Scopus, 2018–2023. They narrowed their selection to 23 items for analysis and found an absence of a universal definition of academic culture. They argued that academic culture should be viewed as a triad of research culture, educational culture and organizational culture. They also emphasize the lack of uniformity in the structural components and assert that there is a need for a more standardized approach to their conceptualization. Consequently, they turn to models of academic culture and focus on Chassabi Chorsi et al. (2022) proposal to conceptualize academic environments in terms of 'hardware' and 'software'. The former includes the physical and structural elements of the academic environment, and the latter includes intangible elements such as values, beliefs and intellectual approaches to learning and research.

In this study, we return to the notion of 'culture' itself and describe academic culture in the same way as any other. However, the problem of establishing one agreed-upon definition is a long-running debate that is too complex to summarize here (see, for example, Mironenko & Sorokin, 2018). For our purposes, we take Huber and Reynolds's (2014) framework, which describes culture in terms of 'material', 'social', and 'subjective' resources. Material culture includes the physical artifacts that are commonly used by the members of a cultural group (e.g., tools, goods, foods, clothing, etc.); social culture includes the institutions of the group (e.g., the language, religion, laws, rules of social conduct, folklore, cultural icons, etc.); and subjective culture includes the beliefs, norms, collective memories, attitudes, values, discourses and practices that group

members commonly use as a frame of reference for making sense of and relating to the world. Most studies are confined to this last dimension. Taking the first and second into consideration provides a richer picture, and in this study, it allows the analysis of additional aspects of academic culture. Material culture includes, inter alia., the lecture and seminar room, teaching aids, books and articles—physical or virtual; social culture includes the language of a discipline and conventions of seminars or lectures; and subjective culture includes such matters as beliefs about the status of knowledge, the processes of learning and teaching, attitudes toward plagiarism, and norms of assessment (adapted from Huber & Reynolds, 2014, p. 14).

Starting from this theoretical base, the following research question was formulated: *How do international undergraduate students in a Thai university re-conceptualize the notion of “study” as they navigate and adapt to a new academic culture?*

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the study participants (n = 14)

No.	Name	Country of origin	Gender	Academic background
1	Hayma	Burmese	F	English
2	Thanda	Burmese	F	English
3	Camille	French	F	Political science
4	Yuki	Japanese	F	Thai language
5	Budi	Indonesian	M	International relations
6	Frieda	German	F	Southeast Asian Studies
7	Haruka	Japanese	F	Southeast Asian Studies
8	Riku	Japanese	M	International relations
9	Aiko	Japanese	F	International relations
10	Sakura	Japanese	F	International relations
11	Seo-yeon	Korean	F	Thai
12	Anna	Finnish	F	Education
13	Sandrine	French	F	International Relations
14	Estelle	French	F	International Relations

METHOD

As a case study, the target population was international undergraduate students in the Faculty of Liberal Arts at a Thai university during semester 1 in 2023- 24. The participants were selected via convenience sampling. After a pilot phase with 6 students to help refine the questionnaire and interview guide, the survey was distributed online to international students enrolled in the Faculty of Liberal Arts, who were invited to complete the questionnaire and opt to participate in a 45–60-minute semistructured interview via video conferencing. Informed consent was obtained. All names here are pseudonyms.

The interviews were transcribed and coded via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding reliability was established by involving a research assistant in coding some transcripts, which were then compared with the researcher's coding, and a final coding system was created. In this study, owing to space constraints, only data from the interviews were used, with data from 14 students: 2 from Myanmar, 3 from France, 1 from Indonesia, 1 from Germany, 1 from Korea, 1 from Finland, and 5 from Japan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of Learning

Learning as collaboration

The participants from both Europe and Asia said that the learning experience at the Faculty of Liberal Arts differed from the social culture (Huber & Reynolds, 2014) of their home institutions. While the main instruction at their home institution was lecture-based and focused on an individual learning experience, the nature of learning and studying here included collaborative learning. Most participants reported that while learning in their home countries, students took notes from lectures and individually reviewed the material before the examination. Group discussions may be incorporated as distinct sessions, whereas group work and projects may be conducted intermittently or not at all. As observed by Hayma, “I might say I noticed a lot of differences, because in Myanmar, it is the lecture-based approach; we do the activity, but it is just some time. However, here most of the learnings are the project-based learning and student-centered approach”. This observation also holds true for Freida from Germany, who observed that “most classes [here] are a mixture of lectures and some kinds of interactions, like group projects, presentations, and discussions...but [in Germany] this is not usually in one class. Like in one class you only have a lecture and the other class only discussion.”

They also felt surprised and unprepared for the extent of group work, collaborative projects, and frequent interactions with other students, despite finding this experience helpful and paving the way for a new concept of learning: “not only group presentations but also writing group papers... I feel that the atmosphere is like that. That helps me learn a lot” (Yuki, Japan). Haruka (Japan) also showed that she adopted this new concept of learning: “it was my new experience. I feel like I can do [group work] better next time as I know how to do it.” Additionally, engaging in group work or projects helped develop students' interpersonal skills when collaborating with group members, as reflected by Thanda (Myanmar): “We have to be truly smart in regard to choosing people for your

group, but sometimes it is random. Therefore, in those cases, I would say, you have to take some sort of initiative.”

However, some students also perceived challenges in group work. Sakura (Japan) reported a language problem: “Almost all of our students are Thai, so when we have group work, they speak Thai all the time and we don’t understand...it’s difficult to communicate.” Haruka (Japan) noted that “if group members were not interested in deepening the content or discussed more, the consequence could be truly boring...I felt frustrated”. Freida (German) raised a similar point: the success of group work depends on the group members, and the nature of the group work may not always facilitate students expressing their true opinions:

I was in one group where it was amazing [...] the presentation was successful [...] but in another class, I was in a group where no one wanted to say anything and they waited for someone to speak first... [...] I felt like, for the most part, I had a certain idea of how we do things in Germany. However, I don’t want to impose that idea because you probably do it differently here...

This analysis of the differing nature of discussions in Germany and Thailand highlights Freida’s awareness of cultural differences, but she refrained from imposing her German practices on the Thai context. Similarly, Budi (Indonesia) recognized the differences in how questions and discussion points are handled after presentations:

When they are asked about their project or their presentations, they end up not having an answer which sometimes I’m truly confused... However, like it’s their project, they are the master of their project. However, they do not know what the response is. We could have ended sooner if they just said that they don’t know...

This acknowledgment of a new ‘social culture’ (Huber & Reynolds, 2014) by Budi, like Freida, reflects a conscious awareness of the distinct practices in his experience in Thailand without attempting to impose his own cultural norms or adapt his approach to fit the new environment. Instead, both Budi and Freida chose to observe and adapt to local practices, revealing respectful acceptance of the new cultural context.

Types of activities and learning

The demands of in-class activities and the frequency of assignments are another area of difference in social culture. Two participants from European institutions, two from Japan and one from Myanmar, shared similar opinions, stating that they had to work harder and adapt to new tasks. They noted that, for example, doing group presentations required them to learn to delegate tasks, manage group work, and practice oral presentations in English—skills they had not generally practiced at their home institutions.

[We have to] prepare to talk a lot in class in English because we’re not used to that...but also remember that everyone is very accepting. Like everyone is truly accepting and listening to others’ opinions (Anna, Finland).

I think the first two presentations I did, I was truly scared to speak in front of the class, because I'm truly not used to doing this in France...[...] because every week we have some sort of exam or quiz, or things to do or like videos to make. In addition, sometimes I think it is a little bit overwhelming, because I spend hours and hours and hours at the library. In addition, I just keep thinking I would like to go out and explore (Camille, France).

What we see here is a response to the University's 13th strategic plan (2022--2027) and the revised general education curricula, which have been designed to align with the 'Framework for 21st Century Learning', which emphasizes critical thinking and problem solving, cross-cultural understanding, collaboration, teamwork and leadership, communication, information and media literacy and Computing and ICT literacy (Care et al., 2017). The Faculty of Liberal Arts embraces this approach, organizing both teaching and extracurricular activities to foster skills such as collaboration and effective communication. Documents such as the annual assessment report and the curriculum indicate that classroom elements at the university are purposefully designed to support this 'subjective culture' (Huber & Reynolds, 2014), emphasizing active and collaborative learning to nurture student engagement and skill development.

The university's focus on collaborative learning, emphasizing group work as a key component of learning and assessment, is also reflected in the design and allocation of physical spaces across campuses, the material culture as defined by Huber and Reynolds (2014). Interesting observations of the different physical spaces on campus, including the library design and coworking spaces, along with the selection of electronic devices, which may enhance the collaborative learning approach, are mentioned below.

Design and function of the library

The University has transformed its library spaces to better align with the needs of Generation Z, as explained by the Library director¹. Embracing the concept of creating a "life space," the redesign introduces multifunctional areas for active and collaborative learning. These include a 'coworking space' for group projects and discussions, a 'learning space' equipped with various learning tools and facilities for both independent and group study, an 'inspirational space' for innovation and cocreation, and a 'performative space' that students can adapt to their needs. This is an explicit response to the University's 13th strategic plan (2022--2027) and the revised general education curricula mentioned above. The expanding function of the library implies that different learning cultures are reflected in the 'material' dimension of an academic culture.

Three participants said that an allocation of spaces in the library is very interesting and appreciate the new functionalities that allow them to work together and relax, viewing it as a positive evolution, although they used different terms to refer to these facilities. Camille (France) said, "Like with the library, it is comfortable. I can charge my iPad, and I can relax and buy food and drink. In addition, so, yeah, it is very nice. I truly

¹ หอสมุดแห่งมหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์ เปิด "Life Space" สู่การเป็น "Library of Life", 2024. (Translated: "Thammasat University Library Opens 'Life Space' to Become the 'Library of Life'")

like it.” Aiko (Japan) also mentioned the ‘learning center’ at the library: “I go to this learning center and I study there, and I use the plugs [for the computer].”

Libraries are also open for 24 hours during the exam period and provide snacks for students who want to revise. Some see this as a departure from libraries at home, where students quietly study, revise their own materials and borrow books. However, some said that the quiet space to read on campus is limited, which contrasts with their home universities and with their usual way of solitary study. Freida (Germany) would like to find a quiet place to be able to concentrate but has difficulty wherever she goes; there are people talking, or it is too dark. She compares Thai students’ working habits to those of working in cafés. Haruka (Japan) also observes that her home university has a larger library and that students always borrow books there, but this practice is not common at this university.

Multifunctional coworking space

The experience of the group work analyzed above is also parallel with the material culture of the multifunctional coworking space at both the library and the faculty. As we observed above, the library has been designed not only for group work in general but also with specific spaces for different kinds of group work. Many participants are satisfied with the place where they can work together, do group work, exchange ideas and relax at the same time, and remark on the difference from their own universities, as Freida says above, but only some become aware of different purposes, such as Hayma (Myanmar) and Sandrine (France), for example:

Here is like we have, like coworking space and any other rooms for different purposes, but in my country, we don’t have those kinds of rooms for different purposes [...] However, here, like, we can just use the coworking space if you want to study or relax...They have different rooms for different purposes (Hayma).

And I also particularly love the coworking spaces and in the library, the new place... It is truly, truly, truly, truly nice. I truly love it, and it is something we did not do. Well, we do not have one in France, and I wish there would be one, because it is a place where all the students can work or meet or just hang out (Sandrine).

Students generally perceive new spaces as beneficial for studying, expanding their understanding of study environments to include areas where they can work, study, and relax simultaneously—especially for group projects. However, they do not always distinguish the specific functions of this aspect of material culture. Some areas, such as the inspirational or performative spaces, were not accurately identified, which suggests that while students can easily associate the library with cooperative learning, they may struggle to connect it with more abstract functions such as inspiration or performance.

The use of learning tools

Learning tools are another aspect of material culture. Four participants reported that in their home countries, students generally use laptops in class to take notes of the

lecture, and an individual uses his own laptop to work individually. However, when they studied at this institution, they noted that almost all the students used an iPad to take notes and create a presentation, a video or other type of artwork. They noted that the use of the iPad corresponds with the idea of doing group work, as students can collaborate and complete their work more efficiently. Some participants changed their material culture because of changes in the conditions of learning:

Everybody is on the iPad, and it is way easier on the iPad than to do it on MacBook or something [...] In France, it is so much easier to work on the MacBook because it is just typing, typing, typing all day (Camille, France).

Another French student noted the impact of this difference in learning tools on the material environment:

There's one thing that is different from France is that at my campus, there are always many plugs because students often use computers. In addition, I have noticed that in Thailand, the students often use the iPad (Sandrine, France).

Changing concepts of learning

The analysis has shown how learning experiences led participants to reflect on an expanding concept of learning, a significant dimension of their 'subjective culture' in the academic environment (Huber & Reynolds, 2014), influenced by the new social academic culture, which obliges them to move beyond traditional individual and lecture-based approaches to embrace more collaborative learning, such as group work. Students also indicate how the material culture of the university aligns with the social culture of collaborative learning, and as we observed above, the university and its faculties are consciously providing more spaces to support this collaborative learning environment, and the policy has an effect on how international students think about their own learning.

The findings thus introduce a novel perspective by emphasizing the intersection of social and material culture in education and the impact of subjective culture. While previous studies, such as Beynon (2024), have explored the impact of study abroad experiences and focused on how students adapt their behavior to the new academic culture—particularly the collectivist tendencies of Thai students, who prefer to work in groups and maintain polite, nonconfrontational communication—there has been little reflection on how this social culture is mirrored in the material culture of the learning environment and how this is a factor in changing students' subjective culture and, in particular, their concept of learning. The analysis thus far shows that the collaborative nature of group work, which is central to Thai academic and personal culture, is not only a part of social culture but also embedded in the physical spaces designed to facilitate this collective learning. We turn now to the concept of teaching.

Experiences of Teaching

The participants observed distinct differences in the social culture of the classroom between their home and host institutions and highlighted various differences in teaching

approaches, types of in-class activities, presentation styles, discussion styles and flexibility in class management. There are therefore elements of social and subjective cultures present in these data.

Teaching approaches

Participants from universities in Japan, Myanmar, Finland, France, and Germany noted that their home teachers primarily use a lecture-based approach as the main medium of instruction. For example, Haruka (Japan) noted, "Most of the time, we have lectures... Professor speaks for 90 mins and students are just listening, and we only do individual reports and exams." In contrast, they reported that their teachers here employ a diverse array of methods, including lectures, group discussions, pair work, individual projects, and community engagement projects, reflecting the active learning philosophy at the University mentioned above. For example, Anna (Finland) appreciated the civic engagement course, stating, "Civic engagement was mainly about this project outside the class. It wasn't too much lecturing. We focused on our group project, which was different from what I had experienced before."

Many participants had positive responses to the dynamism in classroom management, with a variety of activities both inside and outside of class. Budi (Indonesia) noted that in most classes he attended, the teachers were very "active, engaging to the point that I never had that kind engagement for my whole life... He kept asking us to participate..." Sakura (Japan) viewed this as a valuable opportunity to develop public presentation skills, which were rare at his home institution: "In my home university, I do not have many opportunities to present in class, so it was a bit hard for me... but this is a great opportunity to improve my speaking skills." Similarly, Yuki (Japan) noted that group work helped her build strong interpersonal relationships with classmates: "There are many group works... The atmosphere helped me a lot because the Thai students tried to include me. We have a Line chat group and invite me for lunch so we can relax and work together."

Almost every participant observed that the teachers here were notably friendly and less hierarchical and that this positive and engaging atmosphere fostered an eagerness to learn. These reflections surfaced consistently across various nationalities, both inside and outside of classroom environments. For example, Hayma (Myanmar) noted that the teaching style encouraged discussion and equality in the classroom: "the teacher truly encouraged the students to participate... there's no inequality in the class." Similarly, Camille (France) reflected, "When the teacher is truly nice and wants to teach us, I think we want more to go to the class and learn."

Japanese, Korean and German students shared similar experiences, commenting on how the less hierarchical relationship contrasts with their experiences in their home countries. Yuki (Japan) appreciated being able to communicate with teachers via email, something that is less common in her home country: "It's more comfortable... I can ask something through email, and they respond promptly." Aiko (Japan) noted how frequent interactions in class create a more engaging learning environment, which differs from the more reserved student-teacher dynamic in Japan. Freida (Germany) and Seo-Yeaon (Korea) echoed this, describing how the "less hierarchical relationship" makes interactions with professors more relaxed and approachable, enhancing the learning atmosphere. In summary, the nature of classroom relations, which arises from the social

culture of this academic environment, is experienced positively by students and affects their subjective concepts of teaching and learning.

Beyond the classroom, the friendly relationship between students and teachers extends to informal interactions. Many participants, especially those from Myanmar and Japan, noted how easily they could connect with teachers outside of class. Thanda (Myanmar) mentioned group hangouts organized by teachers, an experience she had not encountered in her home country: "...we hang out as a group...with the whole major, and things like that." Japanese participants, Riku and Yuki, were surprised by the use of LINE for teacher–student communication. In Japan, it is considered inappropriate to interact in this way, but in Thailand, teachers actively communicate with students through the app: as Yuki (Japan) mentioned, "I was surprised when I entered the class LINE group made by the teachers... it's very good; we can ask questions more frequently."

However, some participants faced challenges related to their subjective culture, their concepts of teaching and learning, and adjusting to this new teaching approach, such as staying active in class, managing workload, and overcoming language barriers. Estelle (France), who was familiar with group work in her home country, observed that "[A group presentation] in my country is more like an enormous one. You do it once at the end of the semester. Here in Thailand, they are smaller and could be weekly... I had to learn to work harder."

The participants also reported differences in class size and the material culture of the classroom layout, which create different types of relationships with teachers. Aiko (Japan) noted that while typical classrooms at her home institution accommodate up to 120 students, the smaller classrooms allow for better communication with teachers. Yuki echoed this, noting that smaller class sizes were more conducive to interaction and engagement.

Class management

The participants noted longer class durations at the host institution—the social culture—which are typically three hours with a break, compared with 1- to 2-hour classes at their home institutions. Anna (Finland) noted how this was linked to the different approaches to teaching:

One thing I noticed is that here in Thailand, the lessons are much longer, approximately 3 hours... but I truly liked the teaching methods. Teachers engaged us in various activities, and there were many group discussions. It was much more engaging than just listening to lectures.

Aiko also saw a connection between the length of classes and the teaching approach, which she contrasted with 'just listening to lectures': "Even though the classes are 3 hours, I can do it because it's not just lectures. We can do many activities in class."

Another observation focused on flexibility in classroom management. Many participants said that even though class schedules have been previously planned, they can be modified and negotiated:

...in the gender course. Yeah. The teacher gave us more time, actually on some deadlines. So that was, yeah. She was more flexible there with giving us more

time...and in the political class we like to first discuss, like, what's, when are the exams gonna be? And we also discussed that maybe the first exam could be like a paper that we write... I feel like there. He was very flexible with us, like we also got to choose where we write like the midterm paper. Is it like an exam or a paper? I feel like that was nice [in my country], I would say we have one choice, especially at university. (Anna, Finland)

However, in some cases, participants are aware of this flexible nature and social cultural difference but note that too much flexibility may lead to confusion and suggest more discipline:

I realized that everything is very... like sometimes things are last minute, like in Germany, at University everything like the first day you get all your information about your presentation and your essays and everything ...two months or three months in advance, and then I can prepare... However, here, sometimes I was a little bit shocked like, oh, why are they only telling us now? I saw that in like several classes. Therefore, I think that is just the way you do it. In addition, it does make sense. However, for me. I think that is something that could lead to some confusion for sure (Freida, German).

Like Freida, Budi (Indonesia) noted that class management is rather flexible; in particular, students can negotiate the deadline and become absent from class without providing any evidence:

Teachers are sometimes "too kind" ...I feel they can be more disciplined with the students. In Indonesia, the teachers are very very strict... I think this is cultural thing...We truly respect and put teachers on that level. Moreover, at Thammasat, teachers are friendly. However, being friendly is one thing, but discipline students is also important.

In summary, we see here that students have a new understanding of the social and subjective culture of 'teaching', which influences their concepts of teaching and learning, of 'study' at a university. There is a major contrast between listening to lectures and being involved in different kinds of group work. The relationships between teachers and students are also perceived as different but suit the learning environment. This contrast is facilitated by the length of classes, which contributes to the reconceptualization that participants undertake.

The findings thus suggest that international students at the Faculty of Liberal Arts encountered new material, social and subjective cultures in the academic context. This differs significantly from many of the students' home universities. While most students fully embrace this new culture, adopting new concepts of learning and teaching, of learners and teachers, others remain more selective, reconceptualizing certain ideas without fully integrating them into their study habits. However, there is no obvious underlying factor, such as gender or country of origin, and further research is needed to analyze these differing responses. With respect to those who embrace the new academic culture, we can see that they progress through a series of developmental stages: 1) encountering new experiences, 2) becoming aware of differences, 3) reconceptualizing

the concept of study, 4) adopting certain practices, and 5) selectively remaining unchanged in others, which can be visualized through a diagram that illustrates the stages of development below:

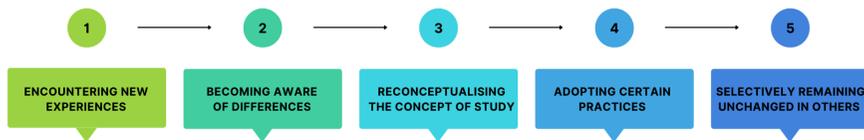


Figure 1: Developmental Stages of Reconceptualizing the Concept of Study for International Students

The findings of this study contribute to the discussion of academic culture in two ways. First, as suggested by Pedraja-Rejas et al. (2022) and Tikhonova et al. (2023), the concept of academic culture is widely debated and lacks a uniform definition, and this study suggests that the use of Huber and Reynolds's (2014) framework of material, social, and subjective cultures to define and explore academic culture in a specific institutional context reveals new aspects of academic culture. This approach goes beyond traditional, one-dimensional interpretations of academic culture by examining the interplay between material, social, and subjective factors, which is compatible with Chassabi Chorsi et al.'s (2022) suggestions to include “software” and “hardware” environments in the analysis of academic culture. The findings illustrate how these elements—ranging from material infrastructure and electronic platforms to teaching methods and student-teacher relationships—shape the academic experience and concepts of international students.

Second, the results challenge the commonly drawn East--West dichotomy in academic culture, as found, for example, in Jin and Cortazzi (2002) or observations by Beynon (2024). The study revealed that academic practices and concepts, such as collaborative learning and interactive teaching, blurred these distinctions. There was no distinction on this dichotomy in the data; the same points were made by European and Asian students. This aligns with the current literature review, which highlights the dynamic and contested nature of academic culture due to factors such as international integration and student diversification.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight how international students at the Faculty of Liberal Arts undergo a transformative experience as they encounter a novel academic culture, in its material, social and subjective forms. This experience challenges their prior assumption about “study”, which is defined in terms of learning and teaching. The shift from lecture-based learning to more collaborative and interactive methods fosters deeper connections among students and between students and teachers, whereas varied teaching methods promote a more holistic understanding of learning. These experiences lead to a

reconceptualization of what "study" entails—moving beyond simply attending lectures and taking exams to actively participate in a dynamic learning environment. While some students fully embrace these new practices, others remain more selective, reconceptualizing certain ideas without fully integrating them into their study habits.

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