A Study on the Influence of Culture on Foreign Educational Administrators' Job Satisfaction in Higher Education in Thailand

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Abstract. Given the dearth of substantial information about foreign educational administrators' working conditions within the Thai context, this study aims to achieve the following objectives: 1) provide a detailed profile of foreign educational administrators managing academic programs in English in Higher Education in Thailand in terms of the following: gender, age group, nationality, monthly income, highest educational attainment, length of service, years of working as an administrator; 2) identify the culture-related challenges foreign educational administrators face within the Thai working context; 3) determine the job satisfaction of foreign educational administrators in the Thai higher education setting, and; 4) analyze the influence of culture on foreign educational administrators' job satisfaction.

The researchers employed both qualitative and non-parametric quantitative research methods, in the form of semi-structured interviews, case studies, and questionnaires. Foreign administrators from Mahidol University, Chulalongkorn University, and Kasetsart University were chosen as sample population. Twenty foreign administrators were asked to participate in the study as their qualifications matched the criteria set by the researchers. Only nine, however, chose to cooperate. They were asked to fill out survey questionnaires and participate in the interviews.

Considering the various cross- and intercultural issues that arise from foreign administrators' roles as educational administrators, it is hoped that this research would be helpful in providing data to help increase the level of awareness of the academic community in general about the status quo of foreign educational administrators running academic programs in English in the Thai higher education context.

Keywords: Culture, Foreign Administrators, Higher Education in Thailand.

1. Introduction

The English language teaching-learning situation in Thailand shows that a good number of Thai institutions have now realized the importance of English as the *lingua franca,* which explains why such a foreign language is now taking its roots in this predominantly Buddhist country.

As has always been the case, whenever a phenomenon breaks out attendant issues follow. Concerns relating to teaching practices, school administrators' management styles, and the like all come to the fore. This paper, however, centers on management issues, particularly involving the experiences of foreign school administrators who work hand-in-hand with Thai management leaders within the country's local socio-cultural context. As such, this study aims to achieve the following objectives: provide a detailed profile of foreign educational administrators running English academic programs in Higher Education in Thailand, identify the culture-related challenges they face, determine their job satisfaction, and analyze the influence of culture on their job satisfaction.

2. Review of Related Literature

According to Hofstede (1993),the people's understanding of the term 'management', including related practices and theories, does not exactly correspond to how it is used in the U.S. Hofstede looks into the cultural differences that different nations have, accounting for those found in management practices.

Culture, as defined by Hofstede (1991), is "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another" (p. 260). Hofstede & Hofstede (2005) further argue "that

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culture works as mental programming" (p. 11) on different levels, namely, national, regional and/or ethnic and/or religious and/or linguistic affiliation, gender, social class, etc.

Ting-Toomey & Oetzel (2001) define cultural conflicts as "the experience of emotional frustration in conjunction with perceived incompatibility of values, norms, face orientations, goals, scare resources, processes, and/or outcomes between a minimum of two parties from two different cultural communities in an interactive situation" (p. 17). Mayer (2000) cites six major sources of cultural conflict including "methods of communication, emotions, history, values, structures, and needs" (p. 9). He also states that culture and conflict are related because culture is inherent in people's ways of communicating with others' past, manners of dealing with feelings, beliefs and structures. Additionally, conflicts happen when individuals find difficulty in conveying concerns that are innately complex caused by situations that are difficult to handle, emotionally speaking. Another possible source of conflict is the structure or the external framework where dealings happen. Accessible resources, decision-making procedures, time limitations, communication protocols, and physical settings form the various elements of such a structure. Other structural elements include distribution of resources, access to information, organizational structure, and political pressures, among others. History means an account of those involved in a disagreement, the structures in which disagreements occur, and the concerns bearing directly on how conflicts surface. Needs include interests, thus propelling the bulk of people's actions. Moore (1986, 1996, cited in Mayer, 2000) classifies needs as substantive, procedural, and psychological.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Instruments and Data-collection Procedures

The researchers employed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews for data-collection. To obtain a higher level of validity, all the questions used in both instruments were piloted, analyzed and rewritten. For reliability, the researchers utilized their deep understanding of and rich background in educational research to achieve intra-observer consistencies and minimize inter-observer disagreements.

3.2. Population and Samples

Foreign administrators from Mahidol University, Chulalongkorn University, and Kasetsart University in Thailand, who agreed to participate, served as sample population. As such, these non-Thai administrators in the undergraduate English academic programs of the aforementioned Universities served as questionnaire respondents and interviewees.

4. Data Analysis

The actual number of respondents was inherently small. Of the 20 foreign administrators whose qualifications matched the respondents' criteria, only nine agreed to participate. Non-parametric research design was used for data analysis. Questions in both survey forms and interviews were adapted from Hofstede & Hofstede's (2005) "five dimensions of national culture: power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long and short-term orientation" (pp. 39-237).

4.1. Objective 1: General Profile

There were three lower- or program-level administrator respondents (33.3%), four (44.4%) middle- or faculty-level administrators. One female and eight male participants responded to this section. China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Austria, and Australia were each represented, with two others from the US, and another two who remained unidentified.

4.2. Objective 2: The Culture-Related Challenges

4.2.1 Findings Solely Based on the Questionnaires

Seven (77.78%) of the respondents had encountered conflicts on the job. Among them, 38.46% had conflicts with their superiors, while 23.08% had 'conflicts with non-teaching staff'. Six (66.67%) respondents identified 'cultural differences' as the leading form of conflict while 45.45% had some

'procedural' concerns followed by both 'substantive' and 'psychological' concerns, accounting for 18.18% each. All respondents considered 'having different value systems' a source of conflict.

4.2.2   Findings Based on Interviews and the Questionnaires

Source 1: Communication

Two Interviewees were satisfied with their 'degree of freedom', whereas one was extremely dissatisfied. Three others had very little freedom as all decisions had to be approved by their superiors. Most of the decisions interviewees could do on their own were limited to concerns of students, part-time faculty, etc. rather than administrative matters involving full-time teachers.

Regarding handling conflicts or expressing disagreements, one Interviewee preferred a more straight-forward style. Two admitted being often involved in more democratic discussions. Recognizing the role culture plays when handling conflicts, two Interviewees were more respectful and cautious to avoid making any mistakes or offenses, protecting their careers.

Three Interviewees were satisfied with the superiors' decision-making styles. Two hoped for more freedom/autonomy. The other two expressed strong dissatisfaction toward being excluded in the decision-making process, being foreigners.

Six interviewees claimed having very few or no significant conflicts with their subordinates. As regards following company rules all the time, two Interviewees thought it 'difficult to generalize' citing certain exceptions. Three, however, demonstrated a strong attitude toward breaking rules in the name of the organization's best interest.

Source 2: Structure

Three Interviewees found formal-style collaboration ideal, whereas two preferred informal personal contacts. Two Interviewees pointed out that getting everyone involved was most challenging. The other two were frustrated by bureaucratic procedures. Additionally, one pointed out that work efficiency was also dependent upon personal relationships, reflecting Thai culture. Four interviewees preferred figuring out hidden rules and arriving at solutions afterwards. One preferred avoiding them; another one liked disagreeing in private.

Source 3: Emotions

Four Interviewees had suffered from stress for the following reasons: decisions not valued, different cultures, heavy workload, and family issues. However, six displayed willingness to stay on the job to continue their careers.

Source 4: Values

Three Interviewees pointed out their gender, being male, as their weakness, identifying aggressiveness as one concern. Three Interviewees preferred a harmonious, happy, and comfortable working environment. One Interviewee wanted more administrative support, and one regarded variety and freedom as more important.

Source 5: History

Almost all, except one (no answer), had experienced administration-related challenges, such as unhelpful former administration, resentment over bureaucracies, out-of-date rules hindering development, etc.

Regarding handling relationships with superiors and subordinates, three Interviewees talked of pleasant experiences, whereas two were dissatisfied with certain regulations and lack of support. All seven interviewees seemed very satisfied with their qualities as leaders citing the following reasons: improved the department, provided personal example, focused on accuracy, worked hard, or applied effective communication skills to earn trust and respect.

4.3. Objective 3: Job Satisfaction

In general, 66.66% of the respondents were satisfied with their job, another 22.22 % felt neutral. Only 11.11 % was dissatisfied.

Questions 8.1- 8.6 looked into the respondents' opinions regarding power distance. Results revealed that 55.6% and 44.4% of the respondents did not often express their disagreement with their staff and teachers, respectively, whereas two thirds felt more comfortable expressing disapproval of their coworkers.

In sum, the findings demonstrated that the respondents showed a large power distance toward their staff as well as teachers, rather than coworkers. There was insignificant emotional distance toward their superiors.

Questions 8.7 to 8.13 explored the issues of individualism and collectivism with 77.8% of the respondents agreeing to have enough freedom. In addition, 77.7% pointed out that they had challenging work and could get a personal sense of accomplishment. Majority showed satisfaction with training (55.5%), physical conditions (66.7%) and use of skills (77.8%). To summarize, there was no significant difference among the respondents in terms of their association with either collectivism or individualism. Most importantly, the respondents were satisfied with their status quo in general.

Questions 8.14 to 8.19, designed to elicit the respondents' culturally related roles in the workplace, showed that 33.3% were not satisfied with their earnings and another 33.3% with their opportunities for advancement to higher-level jobs. More than three quarters (77.8%) agreed that they had a good working relationship with their direct superiors. A significant number of respondents (44.4%) expressed their satisfaction with cooperating with others and their expectations of continuing work in the university. To summarize, aside from a few who were dissatisfied with the pursuit of high earnings and opportunities for advancement, the respondents showed significant satisfaction toward their working relationships and job security.

Questions 8.20 to 27 involved the respondents' reaction toward uncertainty avoidance. One third of the respondents noted that they often felt stressed. However, 66.7% expressed interest in long-term work with the institution. Uncertainty avoidance, by agreeing not to break institutional rules, was shown at 44.4%. This kind of tendency became even more significant when the respondents indicated preference for precise answers. Generally speaking, this showed the respondents' strong tendency to avoid uncertainties through eliminating conflicts permanently (77.8%) or providing very precise instructions (55.6%).

Questions 8.28 to 8.35 were designed to identify the respondents' short-term or long-term orientation yielding the following data: pursuing quick results (77.8%), respecting their traditions (66.7%), valuing personal stability (55.5%) and social and status obligations (33.3%). To summarize, there were no significant differences between short-term and long-term orientation among the respondents except their disagreements with 'face-saving' concerns (33.3%).

4.4. Objective 4: The Influence of Culture on Job Satisfaction

As indicated in the questionnaires, even if 66.7% of the respondents were dissatisfied with their jobs, culture-related conflicts were still major issues for 77.8% of them. Interestingly, 38.5% pointed out that they had conflicts with their superiors, rather than with the non-teaching staff (23.08%), teachers (15.4%), and co-workers (15.4%).

Interviews showed that six (66.67%) respondents identified 'cultural differences' as the leading conflict. Three interviewees were dissatisfied with their degree of freedom primarily because decisions had to be approved by the superiors. Cultural awareness was also cited, propelling them to be more respectful and cautious to becoming offensive, which might affect their future careers. Additionally, some Interviewees also expected not to be excluded from any decision-making process just because they were foreigners, preferring 'the same authority-power as a Thai'. Finally, in both findings, there was no significant data showing the respondents' conflicts with their subordinates and teachers, indicating a larger power distance between them. Although some data illustrated that the respondents often had conflicts with their superiors, questionnaire findings showed insignificant emotional distance towards their superiors.

Under 'structures as one of the main sources of conflict,' 'decision-making procedures/ protocols' as well as 'access to information' were cited as the leading cause, accounting for 25%, respectively. Three (18.75%) cited 'political pressure' as the second cause. Almost half of the respondents (45.45%) stated that they had 'procedural' concerns. A similar result came out in the interview. Two interviewees felt very frustrated when confronted with bureaucratic procedures; one interviewee even pointed out that work efficiency was also dependent upon personal relationships, a Thai cultural trait.

5. Conclusion

Considering the smallness of the actual number of target respondents for this study, it is hoped that the results be treated as non-conclusive and non-prescriptive, allowing other similar studies using a bigger population to pave the way for more conclusive and prescriptive remarks. However, because of the inherent sensitivity of the study, it is hoped that other means to make other respondents participate be employed. Nevertheless, should a similar study be conducted later, it is hoped that all the other details be looked into again as effects of culture on the respondents of this study do not necessarily indicate repetition even if it would involve respondents of the same nationalities.

6. Acknowledgments

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