

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING ACCOUNTING IN ASSUMPTION UNIVERSITY

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งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายที่จะสำรวจสภาพแวดล้อมการเรียนรู้ของนักศึกษาต่างชาติที่ศึกษาวิชาบัญชีในมหาวิทยาลัยอัสสัมชัญ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งเรื่องปัญหาและความไม่สะดวกสบายที่นักศึกษาพบ โดยเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์ร่วมกับการอภิปรายกลุ่ม มีการวิเคราะห์ผลที่ได้จากการสัมภาษณ์ และการอภิปรายกลุ่มเพื่อระบุปัญหาและให้ข้อเสนอแนะเพื่อเพิ่มพูนประสิทธิภาพการประกันคุณภาพของมหาวิทยาลัย

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the learning environment of international students studying accounting in Assumption University, especially the problems and inconveniences that they personally encountered. Data collection was based on a semi-structured interview technique supplemented by a focus group discussion. The findings of interviews and discussion are analyzed in order to identify and make recommendations to enhance the quality assurance of the university.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since its establishment as the Assumption Business Administration College (ABAC) in 1969, the Assumption University (AU) has uniquely used English as the medium of teaching by giving a rare oppor-

tunity to non-native students as well as native (Thai) students. When Thailand's economy grew impressively during 1980s and early 1990s, AU's fame as an international university attracted not only expatriates' children but also aspiring students mainly from neighboring countries as well

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as far-away countries from Australia to Angola and Japan to Jordan.

According to statistics available from the Registrar’s Office, the number of international students studying at AU in 2006 academic year was shown below:

In the above table, accounting major is a part of business administration, and only a few international students chose accounting major. Within accounting major international students, students from China were a majority group.

As the university is continuously striving to monitor academic excellence and quality assurance, the accounting department under the Martin de tours school of management (previously the faculty of business administration) adopted a policy to help international students taking accounting major subjects in spite of the fact that they constitute a small percentage of total accounting students. To implement this policy, the accounting department decided to make a research of the learning environment of international students studying accounting as they perceive. Under this decision, this author explored the learning environment of international students studying accounting as they perceived it.

The Objectives of this Research

1. To collect the perception of international students studying accounting relating to their learning environment, especially with regard to their learning problems and inconveniences;

2. To find ways and means to improve the learning environment of these students.

“Learning” can be defined as a process of ‘knowing and interpreting the known, discovering the new, and bringing about desired change in cognitive and affective skills and characteristics of individuals (Bowen, 1977 as quoted by Watson and Stage, 1999).

To prepare an environment for learning, Kyriacou (1997) points out to look at adequate and suitable provision, room layout, proper equipment set-up and grouping of pupils. Watson and Terrel (1999), after studying the different learning styles of different ethnic groups of students, maintain that it is impossible to create an ideal learning environment for a diverse group of students. As variables of learning environment, they include sound, light, temperature and design. Again, Kauchak and Eggen (2003) say that a safe and orderly learning environment

Table 1 Statistics on International Students

	Semester 1	Semester 2
Number of: Countries	73	76
International students	2,404	2,359
International students taking business administration	1,213 (100.0%)	1,157 (100.0%)
International students taking accounting major	45 (3.8%)	33 (2.9%)
Students from China taking accounting major	28 (2.3%)	19 (1.6%)

is required for learning to occur. In fact, they are referring to the learning environment in the context of a class room climate. To the writer, learning environment is more than a class room climate because it encompasses any factors that can impact on the learning process of students. According to Watkinson (2006), those factors include physical environmental factors, cultural and social factors, and emotional factors.

For this research, the learning environment of international students studying accounting would include (a) reasons for selecting accounting major, (b) understanding about accounting subjects, (c) class room setting and environment, and (d) their plan for the future. The core information could be collected from b. and c. whereas a. and d. would reflect their inspiration and their seriousness of studying accounting.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the aspiration, ambition, feeling and problems of international students taking accounting, it would be appropriate to use interview technique as the research method. The total population of international students taking accounting major was not more than 50. Peter Freebody (2004) classifies interviews into three categories: structured, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews. According to him, semi-structured interviews begin with a predetermined set of questions, but allow some latitude in the breath of relevance. The interviewers can pursue what is relevant to the interviewee to a certain extent. They “aim to have something of the best of both worlds by establishing a core

of issues to be covered, but at the same time leaving the sequence and the relevance of interviewees free to vary, around and out from that core”, to quote him. The writer chose the semi-structured interview, but during the research period the response rate of target students was so low that the writer supplemented the methodology with focus group discussion by the participation of international student-graduates who had taken accounting at AU. Hence, this research could be classified as a qualitative one.

The interviews were conducted by inviting international students with a memo per kind favor of their respective lecturers teaching accounting major subjects. The memo includes the main topics of discussion as mentioned under learning environment.

Only five students listed below signed up for interview:

Table 2 Interviewees' Profile

Code	Country of Origin	Gender
A	China	Male
B	Bangladesh	Male
C	China	Female
D	China	Female
E	China	Male

In fact, international students taking accounting major were delivered invitation memos through their respective subject instructors. Only the above students appeared for interview although the writer waited for two semesters. The response rate was very weak because normally the students were more comfortable for filling up the written questionnaire (with Likert scale) but reluctant to discuss their opinion face to face with a researcher. To understand their percep-

tion and opinion, interview method is more useful. To compensate the low number of interviewees, the writer supplements with focus interview and one e-mail interview. According to the above table, only four Chinese students and one Bangladeshi student appeared for the interview, the Chinese students being divided equally between genders.

Interviews

Every interviewee gave a different reason for choosing accounting as their major subject. Interviewee A selected it because it could provide a better future for graduates, whereas interviewee B selected it for his love of figures from high school experience. In contrast, interviewee C chose it because she believed that accounting is a subject which would not change quite often unlike other subjects. The interviewee D chose it as a means for getting permanent residence in an advanced country. For the interviewee E, he learned accounting at a three-year college in China. Having gained some experiences in accounting, he wanted to learn more about accounting in English. One common feature is that no one wanted to work as an accountant in Thailand as it would require them to learn the Thai language.

Regarding understanding of accounting subjects, the interviewee A admitted that he used to have some confusion with calculation mainly because of his weakness in English, which he studied by himself. Besides, he had difficulties with other subjects except hotel accounting because of the lecturer's understandable pronunciation.

Moreover, he felt uncomfortable in the class as many native students were not willing to speak in English. However, his Grade Point Average (GPA) was much above average. In contrast, the interviewee B was very articulate and eager to talk. He expressed his views that understanding a subject depends on the way a lecturer teaches. He was especially impressed with the teaching style of a native lecturer whom he acknowledged as "the best I've ever met". He also mentioned another native lecturer from whom he learned a lot due to her good teaching style and helpfulness. Hence, he suggested that other lecturers should follow the example of the two lecturers he admired. Unlike him, the interviewee C seemed not fully satisfied because she understood only about 90% of the lectures. She thought that native students had a better advantage because they could ask in their own language if they did not understand the spoken English, and they could go to private tutorial classes conducted in their language. (In spite of her dissatisfaction, her GPA was very high!) However, she admitted that she had not studied accounting before she came to the university, and that she had not attended intensive accounting either. She felt that her financial accounting lecturers did not explain principles very much. She complained that it took three part-time lecturers to complete one subject in a semester. Another problem was that one subject was offered only once in a year (not every semester) resulting in the delay for international students to graduate and to go back home as soon as possible. Unlike interviewee C, interviewee D looked more optimistic and was delighted because she understood nearly all subjects and the lecturers were available to explain

after the class. (Her GPA was good but lower than the interviewee C.) Although she had no problem with the most difficult subject in accounting, she complained that part-time lecturers' English was not as good as full-time lecturers, and that the questions in the examination problems were more difficult than the problems in the class. She used to solve the problems in the text but had difficulties finding out whether her solutions were correct or not. As for the interviewee E, he had some difficulty in advanced accounting I because of its large content.

Another topic asked in the interviewee session was about the classroom setting and environment. The Interviewee A replied that class room setting was quite good but suggested fixed seat should be arranged for each student so that lecturers can see each student and remember the name as well. In the class rooms, other installations such as lighting, air-conditioning and microphones are of international standards. When students could not learn well basic courses in the first semester, they need to depend on the students from the same country of origin. As they progressed to major courses, the students became more serious in their studies. Similarly, the interviewee B felt that overall class room setting was O.K. to him and he had no problem of learning in a class room full with 60 students. Yet, he admitted that he had no native friends in class. The Interviewee C was more specific when she replied that classroom setting and environment in Suvarnabhumi campus were better than those in Hua Mak campus but in both campuses class room temperature was very cold. She appreciated that native students were friendly. However, she was uncomfortable when the guest speakers talked in

native language in orientation seminars for accounting major students. The interviewee D had the problem with having to study in a class of 60 students, giving a reason that the lecturers could not have a chance to communicate with students. She suggested that 40 students or less would be better for both teaching and learning. She complained that some lecturers conducted two-session class (three hours) without a break resulting in boredom and discomfort among students. Like the interviewee C, she appreciated that native students were friendly. Similar to the interviewee D, the interviewee E also appreciated that Thai students were friendly but he complained about his inconvenience two times in some examination halls. In these halls, the students were given chairs attached with writing flap. As it was not a separate desk, the writing space was very small, making it difficult to use the calculator.

As accommodations and facilities can provide international students with a pleasurable atmosphere for study, the interviewees were asked about this topic. The interviewee A answered that private apartments were available around Hua Mak campus, where vans were available for shuttling to Suvarnabhumi campus. The average room rate was about 4,000 baht with electricity and water to be paid on usage. He planned to move to Huamark campus as it was good for him to study. Relating to physical accommodation, the interviewee B had no complaint but he was more concerned with teaching accommodation. He suggested that lecturers should provide solutions in the class because international students did not have option to go to private tutorial classes conducted by outside tutors

in native language. Besides, he recommended that those tutorial classes should be closed if the university wanted higher quality education. For the interviewee C, she recently moved from the university dormitory inside the Suvarnabhumi campus to a private apartment (U-complex), outside the campus at the junction of Bangna-Trad Highway, where there were no disturbances. The only inconvenience was to have to spend some time waiting for AU-loop (the shuttle service provided by the university for students staying at nearby apartments). Although she was far away from her immediate family in China, she felt no home-sickness because she could visit her uncle and grand parents living in Bangkok. The interviewee D was also staying at the U-complex like the interviewee C but for her the problem was less frequent shuttle service of AU-loop van. One of her motives for staying there was convenience to go outside, especially if she gets a part-time job. She too had no problem of home-sickness. In the same way, the interviewee E rented a room near Hua Mak campus. The apartment was quiet and there was no disturbance for him.

The choice of accounting major and their seriousness of studying in AU could have some relationship with their plan for the future. In this context, the interviewees were asked about their plans for the future, if any. The Interviewee A had no intention to study for a Master's degree after graduation but wanted to stay in Thailand for two years to gain work experience and then go back to China because he thought working in Thailand was easier than in China. He learned that one multinational company in Thailand employed Chinese graduates giving good

salary. In contrast, the interviewee B planned to study for a Master in Public Accounting (MPA) in a government university after which he will continue for Ph.D. in accounting. He was so much inspired by the native teachers (as mentioned earlier) that he dreamed of becoming a good and helpful lecturer as a role model. Like the interviewee A, the interviewee C wanted to work in Thailand for three years after graduation, after which she would assess the situation and decide what to do next. But she understood that to work in Thailand she must learn Thai language and literature, which was not easy. The interviewee D also wanted to find a job in Thailand to accumulate experience first at the same time learning Thai language after which she might continue to study for a master's degree. As for interviewee E, he wanted to find a job in Thailand after graduation and apply for the Association of Chartered and Certified Accountants (ACCA) qualification as well as China's Certified Public Accountant (CPA) qualification.

The last topic was an open one where interviewees could give any other comments not related to the previous topics, and also give recommendations. The interviewee A gave an opinion that accounting department was better than other departments but needed to follow its biggest competitor to improve organization. For example, orientation in accounting department was conducted in native language whereas other departments conducted in English. Next, he suggested that the department should help international students in finding jobs. At one time, one make-up class by a part-time lecturer was shifted to Hua Mak campus in the evening, and the students residing in and around Suvarnabhumi campus had to take

taxi for the return. The articulate interviewee B proposed his role-model lecturer to be the chairperson of the department, and suggested a screening examination before students were allowed to choose their major in accounting. The interviewee C's assessment of the accounting department was "good enough" to use her own words. Then, the interviewee D suggested the university should give students some chances to study in America by means of arrangements such as student exchange or friendship program. Finally, the interviewee E pointed out that some major elective courses such as government accounting, real estate accounting, and hospital accounting were available only in some semesters/years. He suggested that these courses should be opened every semester to enable international students to return home without waiting one year for one subject.

From these interviews, it could be concluded as follows:

- These students chose accounting as their major degree without intention of working as accountant in Thailand.
- These students did not have serious problem in learning accounting major subjects yet complained about some part-time instructors quitting before the end of semester.
- They have different opinions about the classroom with 60 students although all were satisfied with the classroom setting and installation.
- They were generally satisfied with the accounting department while two students expressed their appreciation of particular lecturers.

Focus Group Discussion

The participants in focus group discussion were six school of management graduates of AU; majority of them were taking accounting major. Even non-accounting major graduates had studied intensive accounting, principles of accounting I and II, and managerial accounting under old curriculum, so they had considerable experience in learning accounting. Their country of origin is Myanmar. The author invited them to his residence one Saturday afternoon and requested that they participate in a discussion of each topic that would contribute to this research. Moreover, the author asked similar questions to an accounting graduate who was studying for his master's degree in Australia. His email answers were also incorporated in the summary of this discussion. The author asked about each topic to be discussed with each participant taking turns to answer.

The reasons for taking accounting major are combined and summarized as follows:

- Having previous accounting experience in Yangon, Myanmar, and/or passed London Chamber of Commerce and Industry examinations;
- To avoid group works which are required in other major subjects;
- Being in love with figures rather than reading and writing;
- Being attracted by a good job and income as accountant;
- To work as accountant in any English-speaking country.

Relating to the learning about accounting subjects, one of the major subjects (computerized accounting) was taught in native

language that international students had to rely on the books written in English. In another subject, one lecturer gave notes about Thai accounting in native language. One part-time lecturer happened not to have good relationship with international students. In one foundation course, two expatriate lecturers taught the solutions with transparency rather than showing step by step, but one native lecturer was good in teaching. Auditing and taxation subjects are based on national laws so that it would be useful to work in Thailand but not outside Thailand. However, they appreciated the fact that the part-time auditing lecturer, being a professional, could explain about real practice of his subject. Although they understood in the class they faced problems in the examination because of insufficient time to study. Hence, they suggested the current students to learn from friends, to study backward by looking at the solutions, practice the old questions (available at copying shops) and attend the class regularly.

When asked about class setting and environment, one participant replied that he did not make friends with native students but with one Vietnamese student. Another participant complained about glass doors and windows as they felt disturbed by the sight of passers-by, both in Suvarnabhumi campus and P building of Hua Mak campus. Sometimes they felt embarrassed by the visual checking of security guards. They still remembered that the stairs and lifts were crowded at the time of class change delaying to reach another class on time. One of the participants pointed out that accounting class should not have too many students while another participant complained that many students did not like very cold class

rooms especially in examination time. Relating their personal accommodations they did not have any problem since they had a lot of choices.

For extracurricular activities, they rarely communicated with each other except for international students' night organized by international center. Most of the international students did not participate in student council election, and were not organized for festivities like Wai Kru (in respect for rivers) and freshy games. They cited the reasons as the hesitation on the part of the native students to communicate in English and international students' inability to talk in native language. Of course, one participant admitted that he could not participate as he needed to utilize most of the time for study. Since all the participants of the focus group discussion were graduates, the author asked about their job opportunities in Thailand. The problem with three participants was that they could not speak and write the native language. Moreover, as many small companies were not willing to apply for their work-permit, it was not easy to get accounting jobs in Thailand. One graduate sent hundreds of job applications but was invited for just ten interviews. Even then, the companies were reluctant to employ him because of extra costs for appointing expatriates due to government rules and regulations. The majority of those graduates would get jobs in small niches such as international schools, a couple of private hospitals as marketing managers (customer service), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) mostly in remote areas.

E-mail Opinion

To supplement the above two ap-

proaches of data collection, the writer asked a Myanmar accounting graduate of Assumption University who continued his studies in Australia about the same topics. That student pointed out that he had limited time to study resulting in memorizing rather than understanding concepts. Besides, the students had no private study time before each mid-term examination as well as final examination. He did not have a chance to study and practice accounting software that “is useful in real working life”, to quote his words. Again, he also complained that accounting major students had very limited projects to learn new situations and participate in team work.

In his opinion, the university was not strict enough to use “English on campus”, a campaign introduced since early 1990s. Even some of the lecturers explained in native language in the class room in the presence of international students. These kinds of little things, he insisted, could affect students’ behavior and the reputation of the institution. On the other hand, the weakness of most of international students was that they wanted to stick to the fellow-students of their country to avoid home-sickness (which he thought as part of international students’ life), to ask about lessons and to do assignments. Once, he joined accounting major club and asked information about the club but found out that those members he asked could not answer in English.

The only memorable occasions he enjoyed at the Assumption University were international nights arranged by international center and Christmas parties. He also appreciated native students who helped him to deal with the local people, find information, make inquiries, and other useful links

especially in doing projects.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

For most of the international students, the motivation to take accounting major in AU was not to work as accountant in Thailand but just to select one particular major that they were not afraid of or that they thought to be easy to graduate. Even if they choose to work in Thailand, a rare opportunity can be in some multi-national companies but not necessarily accounting related jobs. Some of them wanted to go for further study, like e-mail interviewee, in advanced countries or some of them wanted to return to their country of origin. The main reason was that to work in Thailand one definitely needs to talk, read and write in Thai language, which would be time consuming for them resulting in diversion of their attention from university lessons. Yet, many of them managed to learn some basic words for their daily survival.

Some of the international students’ complaints such as difficulty of examination questions/ lack of sufficient time to study were normal encounters of majority of the students. Similarly, their complaint about strong air-conditioning was also not the exclusive problem of international students but the common problem of most of the students as well as faculty members. Even the hesitation to speak English on the part of native students was also natural in the country that traditionally emphasized education both in secondary and tertiary level in its mother language like those of Japan and France. However, Thailand’s basic education has already turned to learning English

at least for a decade that the new entrants to higher education are now able to talk much better than yester-years' students, yet still not comfortable as their mother tongue. This barrier of communication is slowly breaking down. On the other hand, many groups of international students are more comfortable to associate with their fellow country students naturally. This behavior of international students can be observed even in post-graduate classes.

Many of the international students felt that they were disadvantaged by not being a native student because they were not able to take private tutorial classes which were conducted in native language. In fact, tutorial classes appeared and thrived by giving quick-fix solutions to students but the university never encouraged the students to pursue learning that way. Fellow faculty members used to say that their solutions were sometimes out of date because they were based on the curriculum at the time of their (tutors') student days and faculties usually revised curriculum and changed the text books from time to time.

Many of the interviewees and participants agreed that in spite of their reluctance to communicate in English, native students are friendly and helpful to international students especially in times of festivities such as international nights, Wai Kru and Christmas parties. Nevertheless, international students were reluctant to join various clubs where students talked in their native language. Even not all native students joined the clubs because of their special interest and the pressure of their studies.

Regarding lecturers' performance, the interviewees did not complain about specific lecturers for poor performance or in-

difference to students. Instead, some of them appreciated and praised three native lecturers by name (but not a single expatriate lecturer) for their care of the students.

Their complaint about part-time lecturers can be divided into two aspects: i. some part-time lecturers' English speaking was not as good as fulltime lecturers, and ii. some part-time lecturers could not complete a semester so that other part-time lecturers were invited to continue. In this context, we need to understand the nature of those subjects (such as taxation and tax accounting etc.) that require the expertise of professional practitioners. These part-time lecturers have many years of practical experience and, are updated with changes in laws, rules and standards. Admittedly speaking, fulltime lecturers who are mainly academicians (in contrast to practitioners) are not in a position to transfer full knowledge of those practical subjects. Thus, it is the most appropriate way to invite them and to come and teach at the university that is far away from their office. On the other hand, those experts are fully engaged in their field of profession in such a way that they have to solve urgent problems of their business and sometimes are required to travel abroad at short notice. Moreover, the university, like other universities, cannot expect them to work here as fulltime lecturers by leaving their highly demanding and lucrative jobs. In other words, even their commitment and devotion to come and teach in the university regardless of commuting time and honorarium is a kind of favor the university receives. The only thing the university can do is to tap, as many as possible, a number of professionals who are willing to transfer their knowledge and expertise, and serve as substitute

lecturers in case of emergency. To implement it successfully, they should be rewarded with an honorarium that would be representative to their average income in their original job. As for their English speaking skill, it is natural that many of them may not be as good as fulltime lecturers because in their daily work-life they are using native language whereas fulltime lecturers are always teaching in English. This should not be taken as a weakness, but as a kind of exposure to a different variety of English because today's students will one day become businesspersons across the global village where they will have to deal with various nationalities with different styles of speaking. During a semester this problem could be offset by studying their notes and literature.

The complaint that some lecturers taught two-session class (3 hours) without taking a break should deserve some attention and consideration because the reason given as boring and uncomfortable is factual. It is generally accepted in education institutions that after 50 minutes' teaching, 10-minute break should be given. The university's one session is one and half hours including 10-minute break time at the end. Even though this is longer than one hour it would be just sufficient for the problem-solving subjects like accounting. This break also provides students (as well as lecturers) sufficient time for walking around and/or going to the rest room to refresh themselves after each session. If the teaching/learning session continued for nearly three hours, it may not be very effective.

Interviewees A and C complained about accounting orientation seminars conducted in Thai by guest speakers keeping the inter-

national students in the dark although it would benefit native students who constitute most of the attendees. It could hurt the feeling of international students that they are neglected.

There was also a complaint about one or two lecturers who used to explain about some steps of lessons in native language probably with the intention of helping the native students to understand better. This problem was discussed and warned in accounting department meetings from time to time as it is the policy of the university to teach strictly in English. It is needless to say that this policy should be observed to maintain the university's reputation as an international university. Regarding the complaint that some major elective courses were not opened all semesters, one possible reason is the lack of enough students to register for these courses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The part-time lecturers should be given better incentives to compensate for their time from their demanding and lucrative jobs and in recognition of their expertise and experience in their specialized and professional field. The accounting department should have a reserve pool of part-time lecturers to teach specialized subjects like taxation and auditing.

2. The "English on Campus" campaign should be revived and reinvigorated through such activities as debates, games with international students and clubs. On the other side, international students should be encouraged to mingle with native students rather than studying in their own ethnic group.

3. The lecturers should be aware of and follow the university's rule to conduct the teaching in English. In case they happen to use their native language, the conversation should be short and immediately translated into English, should be followed.

4. The lecturers should be aware of class time-span by giving a 10-minute break before continuing onto the next session.

5. The guest-speakers for the accounting orientation seminars should be requested to talk in English as international students are present on the occasion.

6. The air-conditioning system in each class room should be capable of adjustment depending on the number of students, weather and seasons.

7. All major elective courses should be opened in all semesters so that students (especially international students) need not wait one more semester or one more year to take a particular course.

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