THE CURIOUS CASE OF FAUX-EDUCATIONAL TOURISM IN THAILAND

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The paper explores the phenomenon of “Faux-educational tourism” in Thailand, a newly conceptualized construct that is better defined as a form of migration with explicit non-academic purpose, but where the visit is legalized through the academic status of a visitor. As such, this work examines the experience of using student visas as a source of prolonged stay in the country and the factors that have an impact on the country’s economy.

Keywords: academic mobility; educational tourism; faux-educational tourism

Introduction

Thailand, globally recognized for its tropical climate, rich culture, and hospitality, has long been one of the top tourist destinations. It has also gained significant success in developing not only recreational tourism potential but also the one for educational, medical, and sports tourism. However, as popular as it is, Thailand has always had a complex legal framework for expatriates, and over the past decade, a concerning trend of masking one type of travel under another has emerged. We term this trend “faux-educational tourism,” and it involves foreign individuals exploiting Thailand’s educational visa regulations, ostensibly for learning purposes, but primarily to extend their stays in the country, thus concealing recreational tourism or nomadism under the guise of academic mobility.

While educational tourism, in its genuine form, can bring substantial benefits to a host destination—including economic contributions and cultural exchange—the rise of its faux counterpart presents multiple challenges, including a loss of favorable reputation. Not only does it undermine the credibility of genuine educational institutions, but it also strains administrative systems and potentially deprives genuine students of opportunities.

This research aims to discuss and conceptualize the notion of faux-educational tourism in Thailand. Through data collection and in-depth analysis, we endeavor to provide stakeholders with insights into this emergent issue. Additionally, we will elaborate on the place of faux-educational tourism in the complex framework of academic mobility.

The study examines the evidence obtained from academically mobile individuals who reside in Thailand. It specifically focuses on individuals who obtain student visas to extend their stay in the country while participating in tourist activities.

Objectives:
1. Examine the factors that play a role in tourists’ decision-making process when selecting ASEAN countries as their travel destinations.
2. Investigate the experiences and satisfaction levels of individuals who participate in tourist activities while using student visas as a cover.
3. Explore the connection between visa misuse (Faux) and intentions to relocate among individuals posing as students.

Hypotheses:
1. There is a difference between the motives for education tourism/migration and the phenomenon of faux-academic mobility.
2. Faux-academic practices (including faux-educational tourism) are marked by a lack of educational commitment and are driven by purely recreational motives.
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This study aims to enhance our understanding of the motives and experiences of both tourists and individuals pretending to be students regarding educational tourism. By doing this we hope to gain insights into the impact of faux-educational tourism, on international education programs.

Literature review

Academic Mobility refers to the movement of individuals for educational purposes. People engage in mobility for reasons such as employment opportunities and seeking further education. The terminology regarding this phenomenon is still a subject of debate with studies exploring aspects and factors that influence mobility.


The ongoing discussion on terminology is explored by Glorius et al. (2013) while geography’s role in mobility is studied by Yang & Welch (2010) and Scott (2015).


Altbachs accepted push-pull model (1998) that is frequently employed to elucidate the phenomenon of mobility as evidenced by studies conducted by Li & Bray (2007), Lam et al. (2011), Cao et al. (2016), Erden (2016) and Lee & Kuzhabekova (2018).

Educational tourism as described by Cohen (1974) and further expanded upon by Ritchie (2003) and Maga & Nicolau (2018) involves the fusion of travel and learning. There has been research conducted on tourism, in regions, including the ASEAN countries as explored by Matahir & Tang (2017) and Maga & Nicolau (2018b).

There have been several attempts to describe the phenomenon of education visa abuse. Heckmann (2004) writes about a form of migration resulting from migrants obtaining temporary students visas and overstaying. Liu-Farrer (2009) reports on the so-called ‘educationally channeled labor migration’ but describes only the category of students obtaining employment in the destination country.

However, Ritchie (2000) uses this distinction to separate 'tourism-first' from 'education-first' visitors. Also, faux-students can be long-term visitors, virtually faux-academic migrants.

Our study fills a gap in the literature and provides valuable insights into the unique phenomenon of “faux-educational” tourism and its impact on international education programs.

We define faux-educational tourism as a form of visa fraud where individuals obtain student status for the purpose of extending their stay in the destination country. This phenomenon has become a pressing issue in Thailand. This has led to violations of immigration laws (as reported in various press publications).

Overall, our definition sheds light on mobility, educational tourism as well as the emerging concept of faux-educational tourism providing a detailed understanding of international education trends.
The theoretical framework and method

**Conceptual framework and methodology**

In our study, we adopt the definition proposed by Maga & Nicolau (2018), who defined educational tourism as ‘all learning activities undertaken outside of home geographical environment within a duration limit of between 24 hours and 12 consecutive months’. However, we enhance our framework by merging migration and mobility concepts, emphasizing extended academic mobility's temporal dimension (Maga & Nicolau, 2018). Additionally, we broaden our view of educational tourism, aligning it with Jackson's (1986) inclusive perspective.

*The theoretical framework for academic mobility*

Our theoretical framework for academic mobility is structured as follows (Fig. 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Mobility</th>
<th>Education first</th>
<th>Tourism first</th>
<th>Migration first</th>
<th>Education first</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Tourism</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Tourists</td>
<td>Faux-educational tourists</td>
<td>Expats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Migration</td>
<td>Faux-cademic mobility</td>
<td>Faux-cademic migrants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education first</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Faux-students</td>
<td>Academic Migrants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1 – Theoretical Framework of Academic Mobility**

(made by co-authors)

To understand the factors that influence the choices of tourists, in ASEAN countries we have adopted the Altbach Push-pull model (Altbach, 1998). While creating our measurement scales we have referred to the works of Lam et al. (2011). Cao et al. (2016) although these studies primarily focus on mobility than educational tourism. However, by considering tourism as a subset of mobility our aim is to gain valuable insights.

Drawing from the research conducted by Maga & Nicolau (2020) who interviewed tourists in Phuket, Thailand we have developed a questionnaire consisting of 44 questions. We received 101 responses from individuals involved in mobility, within Thailand.

For our analysis, we are using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS SEM) method. To refine our framework, we have differentiated between factors related to tourism and those related to education based on Ritchie’s work (Richie, 2003) and thus defined the factor matrix (Fig. 2).
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Data and sample

The sample of educational visitors in Thailand not limited to only students of higher educational institutions was obtained through volunteer sampling. It also includes a broad category of “education visa” holders. According to UN data, Thailand hosts over 30 thousand international students yearly, and WENR reports that Thailand is Southeast Asia's third most popular study destination. Obtaining an ED (Education) visa, however, does not necessarily indicate an international student in Thailand, as obtaining an ED visa is often used for illegal residence in Thailand.

The author distributed the survey via an internet community. Identified that the whole faux-academic mobility subsample (19 people, questionnaire translated) was enrolled in language training, so we chose to use “Language training” as a proxy. As per the sample data, no faux-students were educational tourists, as all stayed in the country for more than 12 months, so they were classified as academic migrants. Also, we'll study what factors affect faux-academic mobility.

We received 101 responses from academically mobile individuals in Thailand. 40% of respondents were from Thailand (domestic educational tourism), others were from Russia, Vietnam, China, etc.

Out of our sample of 68 academic migrants and 24 educational tourists (temporal distinction), 72 visited for degree training, 20 for non-degree training, 19 of which were language training programs.

We used a non-probability voluntary sample. The questionnaire was constructed using Google Forms and distributed via LINE Messenger, Blackboard Collaborate, Facebook, and Telegram messenger to academically mobile individuals, of whom nearly 50% are students at Stamford International University, Thailand and 24% are Russians. The scale used was a 4-item Likert scale. The author used a 4-point forced scale to avoid “middle-option bias” (Carp, 1974). The software used for analysis was SAS Enterprise guide 7.1, R, Smart PLS. To mitigate a problem of a small sample we are using the bootstrapping technique and accept a lower confidence level (0.9).
The overall Cronbach’s alpha was 0.86 for the whole sample and 0.78 for both groups of education-related and tourism-related factors.

**Variables**

Among the relocation intent variables, we group indicators of local language acquisition and an intent to seek employment (Tremblay, 2005). As an auxiliary question we will explore the connection between educational tourism and relocation intent. We study relocation intent as an effect of mobility experience and satisfaction with it (Tremblay, 2005), understanding relocation intent is important as immigration of high-skilled educated immigrants is beneficial for the economy.

**Factors breakdown:**

**EPULL factors, pull-factors related to education:**
- Low tuition fee in the host location (Cao, 2015)
- Cultural similarity to the home location (Lam, 2012)
- Prestige of the mobility to the host location (Cao., 2015)
- Host institution provides high quality education (Cao., 2015)
- The program offered at the host university is unique and reputable
- The level of English in the host country is very high (Lam, 2012)
- Better career prospects in the host location than at home
- Unconstrained conscious choice of the host location (Maga & Nicolau, 2018).

**EPUSH factors, push-factors related to education:**
- The mobility was not charged additional fee (Cao, 2015)
- Grant/scholarship to cover mobility cost was available (Cao, 2015)
- Geographical closeness of the host location (Tremblay, 2002; Lam 2012)
- Respondent’s level of English is very high (Findlay et al., 2006)
- Mobility to other countries was too expensive (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
- Mobility to other countries required higher academic performance (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
- Respondent’s academic performance in the home location is above average.

**TPULL factors, pull-factors related to tourism:**
- The host country has a warm pleasant climate (Hampton, 1998; Ritchie, 2003; Lam, 2012)
- Low cost of living in the host location (Cao, 2015)
- Accommodation is cheap in the host country (Cao, 2015)
- Host location is cheaper than home location in terms of most purchases
- Transportation costs to the host country are low
- The host university/educational institution is located in an area popular among tourists (Maga & Nicolau, 2018).

**TPUSH factors, push-factors related to tourism:**
- The climate in the host country is much better than in my home country (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
- My friends/fellow students from my home country also participate in this mobility alongside me (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
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My friends/fellow students from my home country went on mobility here before (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
I can call myself a frequent traveler (Li & Bray, 2007)

**EDEXP factors, factors, characterizing education related experience:**
Major of mobility (Verbik & Lasanovski, 2007)
Degree status of mobility (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
Respondent finds studying at the host institution very challenging (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
I find most of my fellow students very knowledgeable (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
Instructors at the host university have a very high level of English (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
Respondent spent most time studying (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)

**TEXP factors, factors, characterizing tourism related experience:**
Overall costs experience (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
Respondent has sufficient time to travel around and enjoy the area (Maga & Nicolau, 2018)
Respondent has visited many local tourist attractions (Lam, 2012)

**ESAT factors, satisfaction with education factors:**
Satisfaction with the knowledge and the skills respondent acquired during mobility
Instructors here provide very high standard of teaching
Respondent thinks this mobility broadens their horizons
Respondent is satisfied with the mobility experience

**TSAT factors, tourism satisfaction factors:**
Respondent would like to return to the host country as tourist some day
Respondent would like to explore more of the host country (Maga & Nicolau, 2020)
I find the host country a very pleasant place.

**REL factors, factors characterizing possible relocation intent:**
The host country can be a good place for living
Respondent can speak the local language of the host location
Respondent is learning the local language / was learning during mobility
Respondent is considering finding a job in the host country (Tremblay, 2005)

**PROF factors, individual’s profile factors:**
Respondent’s age.
Respondent’s gender
Respondent’s country of residence
Level of academic program
FAUX-cademic mobility factors:
Participation in language training as mobility tool (this tool proves to be the main instrument of visa abuse).
Results

Based on our research we found the following findings (as shown in Fig. 3). We noticed differences between groups engaged in tourism/academic migration and those involved in faux academic mobility, the path coefficients show that the main factors affecting faux-educational tourism are the tourism pull factors, not education-related factors (the p-value for this relationship is <0.05). However, the group comparison was not an integral part of this analysis.

![Path Coefficients]

Figure 2 - Summary of path coefficients for Faux-cademic mobility
(made by co-authors)

Table 1 - Path coefficients for faux-cademic mobility: direct effects
(made by co-authors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Original Sample Estimates</th>
<th>t-statistics</th>
<th>P Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EDEXP -&gt; ESAT</td>
<td>0.452***</td>
<td>5.145</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEXP -&gt; TSAT</td>
<td>0.580***</td>
<td>7.187</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSAT -&gt; RELOCINT</td>
<td>0.613***</td>
<td>7.275</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faux -&gt; EDEXP</td>
<td>-0.283***</td>
<td>3.341</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEXP -&gt; ESAT</td>
<td>0.308***</td>
<td>3.250</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPUSH -&gt; Faux</td>
<td>-0.276**</td>
<td>3.181</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPUll -&gt; Faux</td>
<td>-0.218*</td>
<td>2.267</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESAT -&gt; RELOCINT</td>
<td>0.213*</td>
<td>2.214</td>
<td>0.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPULL -&gt; Faux</td>
<td>0.356*</td>
<td>2.055</td>
<td>0.040</td>
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<tr>
<td>TEXP -&gt; EDEXP</td>
<td>0.195</td>
<td>1.558</td>
<td>0.120</td>
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<tr>
<td>TPUSH -&gt; Faux</td>
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<td>0.184</td>
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<tr>
<td>EDEXP -&gt; TSAT</td>
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<td>0.907</td>
<td>0.365</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faux -&gt; RELOCINT</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td>0.368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faux -&gt; TEXP</td>
<td>-0.039</td>
<td>0.331</td>
<td>0.741</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1
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Some interesting direct effects were observed in the result (Tab. 1).
Both education and tourism experiences are positively linked with satisfaction, and both satisfaction variables for tourism and education are positively linked to the intention to relocate, with tourism satisfaction having a stronger association with relocation intent rather than education satisfaction (coefficient estimates of 0.613 against 0.213).

Participation in ‘faux’ practices is negatively linked to the education experience, meaning that faux students probably don’t engage in the educational activities. Quite interestingly, however, people who engage in educational activities and are satisfied with it, also mainly are happy with the tourist experience in the country.

The educational push and pull factors are negatively associated with ‘faux’, which can indicate that the higher the prestige of the educational system in the destination country the lower the probability of participating in the faux-educational practices. On the other hand, factors related to tourism attractiveness have a positive association with ‘faux’.

Table 2 - Path coefficients for faux-ademic mobility: indirect effects
(made by co-authors)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path Coefficients</th>
<th>Original Sample Estimates</th>
<th>t-statistics</th>
<th>P Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEXP -&gt; TSAT -&gt; RELOCINT</td>
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<td>4.796</td>
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<td>Faux -&gt; EDEXP -&gt; ESAT</td>
<td>-0.128*</td>
<td>2.471</td>
<td>0.014</td>
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<td>EPUSH_ -&gt; Faux -&gt; EDEXP</td>
<td>0.078*</td>
<td>2.286</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDEXP -&gt; ESAT -&gt; RELOCINT</td>
<td>0.096*</td>
<td>2.065</td>
<td>0.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPULL -&gt; Faux -&gt; EDEXP</td>
<td>-0.101*</td>
<td>1.963</td>
<td>0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPUSH_ -&gt; Faux -&gt; EDEXP -&gt; ESAT</td>
<td>0.035*</td>
<td>1.883</td>
<td>0.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faux -&gt; EDEXP -&gt; ESAT -&gt; RELOCINT</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
<td>1.769</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPULL -&gt; Faux -&gt; EDEXP -&gt; ESAT</td>
<td>-0.045</td>
<td>1.722</td>
<td>0.086</td>
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</table>

Signif. codes:  0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05 ‘.’ 0.1 ‘ ’ 1

The summary of indirect effects in the model (Table 2) indicates that factors related to tourism experience are positively associated with the intention to relocate through a positive tourism experience in the destination. Additionally, there’s a generally negative indirect effect of ‘faux’ on education satisfaction through education experience, most likely we assume the actual education experience either never occurred or was very shallow. The model is specified in Fig. 4.
Discussion and conclusions

Faux-educational engagement
When it comes to migrants, we found that they tend to avoid formal educational institutions and are more attracted to the tourist aspects of a location. Interestingly our research shows that educational motivation is not a factor for this group. As a result, these visitors do not plan to relocate which alleviates concerns related to migration risks.

Distinct characteristics of faux students
Through our examination we have identified characteristics of faux students. These individuals typically enroll in degree programs and tend to spend less on essential items compared to real students. They also often reside in far off locations from the institutions they attend whereas real students usually prefer proximity. Faux students view the host location as a place to live. Perceive the host institution as lacking prestige. Additionally, they experience competition among their peers.

Factors influencing visa abuse in an educational context
Our study sheds light on factors that influence the likelihood of visa abuse under the guise of education.
These factors include peer influence, the popularity of the tourist destination, intentions for employment opportunities, affordable transportation options, cost effectiveness of living expenses and geographical considerations.

Alignment with educational tourism literature
Our research is in line with the existing literature on tourism. Provides some support for the idea that tourism takes precedence over education as suggested by Ritchie & Priddle (2000) and Ritchie (2003).
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However, our findings contradict the viewpoints presented by Altbach (1998) Lam (2011) and Cao et al. (2017) by showing that the expected attractions associated with education were not actually experienced in the case of individuals who engage in academic migration.

**Contributions of the study**

The study we conducted has provided contributions in the following areas:

1. **Disparities in Proficiency.** We have shed light on differences in proficiency levels between tourists and academic migrants.
2. **Differentiating Factors.** We have identified variables that distinguish between mobility and academic mobility such as proximity to the destination, lower expenditure, desirability of the host location and limited competition among students.
3. **Influential Factors.** Through regression analysis we have uncovered factors that influence both tourism and academic migration.
4. **Drivers of Academic Engagement.** We have determined the factors that impact an individual's engagement in pursuits.

These findings are crucial for institutions and policymakers who're interested in understanding student attraction and making informed decisions regarding academic choices.

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Altbach, P. G. (1998b) *Comparative higher education: knowledge, the university, and development*. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong.


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