Assessment of Policies on Student Mobility towards a Model Framework for Higher Education Institutions: A Focus on Thailand

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Abstract

This study aimed to assess the policies on international student mobility (ISM) in public and private universities, and to develop a model framework on ISM for higher education institutions in Thailand. Methodology: the research was conducted in 2015 using questionnaires and interviews of university administrators. Standard mathematical computation was done on quantitative data; content and SWOT analysis were done to examine qualitative data. Result and discussion: results showed that public and private universities complied with all national ISM policies except for the authorization by the Bureau of Immigration for HEI to accept foreign students, which was slightly implemented. Some participants suggested that it was difficult to process visas for international staff and students. Thus, this policy may be modified to facilitate easier visa processes. As for the institutional ISM policies, both public and private universities had most policies implemented. Recommended policies obtained include the policy on hiring instructors with good English proficiency. An ISM committee consisting of representatives from each faculty may be formed to facilitate the ISM reforms on campus. A network among universities should also be set up. It was highly recommended that an English-speaking environment is created on campus. Based on the data obtained from 17 public and private university administrators, the researchers developed a model framework and action plans to improve ISM in higher education institutions in Thailand. Conclusions: The researchers proposed that working committees should be formed to serve as an integral part in setting a clear direction on ISM policies, create networks among parties, and to promote ISM policies.

Keywords: *assessment, international student mobility, policy, higher education, model framework*

1. Introduction

The rise of the knowledge-based economies greatly impacts education. A global education has ensued as a result of internationalization. For the past decades, an increase in academic mobility including both people movement and transnational academic programs is noted. Based on the data of UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2014), the number of students pursuing studies abroad continues to surge as higher education institutions around the world compete for the best and brightest minds. But there is growing competition for students from emerging regional destinations that may offer more affordable and culturally-relevant programs of study. Relatedly, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2013), between 2000 and 2011, the number of international students has more than doubled.

An international education has become a growing business because of the globalization and liberalization process that has caused freer flow of cross-border education. While the number of international programs is rising, the internationalization efforts in Thailand still face significant challenges. In the past years, the number of international students entering the country has doubled (UNESCO, 2013). This made the Higher Education Commission of Thailand to develop and improve the whole system to be more competitive globally, for example, responding to the demands of internationalization through policies and initiatives. International student mobility is an economic strategy of attracting big enrollment and earning merits for the institutions through enhanced collaboration with other institutions and enriched academic programs and can promote enhanced opportunity to academic development and socio-cultural engagement with people of other cultures. Likewise, OECD (2013) mention that among the benefits of studying abroad perceived by an increasing number of students are the cultural enrichment and improved language skills, high-status qualifications, and a competitive edge to access better jobs. Studying abroad

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helps students to expand their knowledge of other societies, languages, cultures and business methods, and to leverage their labor market prospects.

International student flows are affected by various push factors like the limited availability of places for domestic students in local institutions of higher learning or pull factors which could be those serving to attract foreign students to study in a country, or policies encouraging local students to choose studies in a local institution of higher learning. Moreover, the government roles in seven countries, namely; Australia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Republic of Korea and Thailand, cover three main domains: control and regulation of domestic students leaving the country, financing and provision (UNESCO, 2013).

Salient policies related to the flow of international students, as put forth by Dr. Tan, are grappling with government policies regarding foreign student admissions and local students leaving for overseas studies, integrating foreign students and dealing with local/foreign tensions on campus, provision of quality assurance mechanisms and the attraction of quality academic staff who can teach in English, and attaining a balance between providing courses that are popular with foreign students, while maintaining the semblance of a balanced menu of courses that meet economic needs and provide the balanced education that a higher education promises students (UNESCO, 2013).

According to the Thai Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC), Thai public and private higher education institutions offer a wide variety of international programs in many disciplines both at undergraduate and graduate levels including the certificate programs. Many programs are delivered in collaboration with the world's renowned universities and provide an opportunity for students to have learning and living experiences both in Thailand and abroad, while some of the programs offer double degrees. International colleges had been established in several universities to administer the provision of international education and provide necessary support services for foreign students (OHEC, 2011).

Academic institutions in Thailand articulate institutional commitment to international education and global learning. Kanjananiyot and Chaitiamwong (2014) explain some institutions develop a separate internationalization plan to supplement the overall strategic plan or create a campus-wide task force to lead internationalization efforts. They noted that 67 percent of Thai universities have their mission statements refer to international or global education while 27 percent have some aspects of internationalization mentioned. Almost all public/autonomous universities have internationalization in their mission statements, while for private universities and Rajabhat universities there are approximately half of them. A nearly identical percentage reported that internationalization is among the top five priorities in their current strategic plans.

In addition, Kanjananiyot and Chaitiamwong (2014) mentioned that the three main goals for Thai universities to engage in internationalizations are: 1) to improve student preparedness for a global era (31 %) which is also the number one goal of universities in all sectors, 2) to respond to the growing public demand for global competitiveness in knowledge creation/innovation and talent development (20 %), and 3) to diversify students, faculty, and staff at home campus (14 %).

In terms of student mobility, the four-top education abroad experiences provided in Thai universities are international internship, study abroad, field study abroad, and research abroad. But Rajabhat and Rajamangala universities, education abroad programs are far fewer, and are mostly limited to study abroad and international internship. Also, students engaged in education abroad experiences are just a very small amount as most universities reported that there are less than 5 % or around 5-10 % of their students (Kanjananiyot and Chaitiamwong, 2014).

Kanjananiyot and Chaitiamwong (2014) suggested that (1) the internationalization efforts have slowed down due to the reorganization process, leaving individual universities to determine their own directions as seen necessary; (2) the new structure has seen many more newly upgraded universities to be under the auspices of Thailand Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC). The numbers, grown from 78 in 2002 to 173 in 2014, have made it harder to promote internationalization across the board, when considering that each has its own stage of development and specific context to handle; (3) the 1999 National Education Act stipulates that all universities must put in place their quality assurance systems to be ready for assessment. The so-called Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and External Quality Assurance

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(EQA) have stolen concentration of many universities to shift their focuses on quality assessment imposed by the Office of the National Standard and Quality Assessment (ONESQA), and OHEC.

This study aimed to address challenges in operating international education programs and to improve the international education in Thailand by closely examining its processes, policies, and practices. The assessment of the current policies and the development of action plans was conducted to address weaknesses and threats. Finally, a model framework on International Student Mobility (ISM) was proposed with the goals to strengthen each country's transnational education and further promote regional connectivity amidst the imminent ASEAN economic integration in 2015.

2. Objectives

This research project aimed to assess the policies on International Student Mobility (ISM) in Thailand from data obtained from administrators of public and private universities and propose policy reforms and action plans to address the identified weakness and threats on ISM. A model framework on ISM is to be developed based on the identified weakness, problems and issues.

3. Materials and Methods

This research was conducted in Thailand in 2015. Descriptive evaluative method of research was used to assess the policies of ISM in Thailand. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from questionnaires and personal interviews of the administrators of 6 public and 6 private universities ranking top six on the number of foreign students in 2013. Participants were Ramkhamhaeng University, Mahidol University, Khon Kaen University, Thammasat University, Chulalongkorn University, and Burapha University, Assumption University, Bangkok University, Siam University, Asia Pacific International University, Rangsit University, and Stamford International University. The total of 17 administrators participated in the study.

For quantitative data collection, 13 subjects, 5 from public universities and 8 from private universities, participated. They asked to give the scores of 1-5 on a questionnaire based on how strictly the national and institutional policies were implemented in their institutions. The score of 5 indicates that the policy was strictly implemented and the score of 1 indicates that the policy did not exist. To acquire the qualitative data, an unstructured interview and a focus group discussion were conducted with 17 and 12 participated university administrators, respectively.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Implementation of the National ISM Policies in Public Universities

To obtain the quantitative data, 5 administrators from public universities were given a questionnaire on how strictly the national and institutional policies were implemented at their institutions. The quantitative data, shown in Table 1, indicate that overall the national policies were moderately implemented in the public universities ($\bar{x}$ = 3.91). Out of the seven policies surveyed, two including the policy on customizing the curriculum to the needs of foreign students, and the policy on processing of student visas or study permits were strictly implemented (each received $\bar{x}$ = 4.80). Four policies were moderately implemented, including the policy on the accreditation of the programs that can accept foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 4.40), the regulation of foreign students in specific disciplines ($\bar{x}$ = 4.40), the equivalency and recognition of 11th and 12th years of secondary education taken in the country of origin ($\bar{x}$ = 4.00), and the monitoring of the foreign students by the Bureau of Immigration ($\bar{x}$ = 3.80). Only one policy on the authorization by the Bureau of Immigration for HEI to accept foreign students was slightly implemented ($\bar{x}$ = 3.20)

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Table 1 Means and S.D. of national policies in public universities (N = 5)

National policies	Mean	S.D.	Implementation
1. Accreditation of the programs that can accept foreign students	4.40	0.89	moderately
2. Authorization by the Bureau of Immigration for HEI to accept foreign students	3.20	2.05	slightly
3. Regulation of foreign students in specific disciplines	4.40	1.34	moderately
4. Customizing the curriculum implementation to the needs of the foreign student	4.80	0.83	strictly
5. Equivalency and recognition of 11th and 12th years of secondary education taken in the country of origin	4.00	1.73	moderately
6. Processing of student visa or study permit	4.80	0.44	strictly
7. Monitoring of the foreign students by the Bureau of Immigration	3.80	1.64	moderately
Total	3.91	0.40	moderately

4.2 The Implementation of the Institutional ISM Policies in Public Universities

The public university administrators indicated that their institutions implemented the policies moderately ($\bar{x}$ = 3.69, Table 2). This score was calculated from the total of 10 policies surveyed. The policy that received the highest score was the policy on the credit transfer from the institution at the country of origin ($\bar{x}$ = 4.60). While this policy was strictly implemented, six other policies were moderately implemented, including the policies on the submission of the admission requirements ($\bar{x}$ = 4.20), the admission of students in any discipline ($\bar{x}$ = 3.60), the requiring minimum or maximum work credits per semester ($\bar{x}$ = 4.20), the payment of additional fees for foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 4.40), the adherence to the study plan of the whole program ($\bar{x}$ = 4.00), and the regular monitoring of the foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 3.80). The policy on the length of residence was slightly implemented with the mean scores of 3.40. There were two policies that received the mean scores of between 1.5-2.5, which are the policies on signing of contract or agreement provision of additional support services ($\bar{x}$ = 2.50) and on setting a maximum allowable number of foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 2.20). The statistical analysis suggests that these policies existed but were not implemented in the public universities.

Table 2 Means and S.D. of institutional policies in public universities (N=5)

Institutional policies	Mean	S.D.	Implementation
1. Submission of the following requirements:			
· Proof of completion of relevant academic degree or academic preparation	4.80	0.45	strictly
· Certification of English Proficiency	4.20	0.84	moderately
· Recommendation for international study	3.80	0.45	moderately
· Student visa or special study permit	5.00	0.00	strictly
· Authorization from the Bureau of Immigration	3.20	2.05	slightly
Subtotal	4.20	0.47	moderately
2. Admission of students in any discipline	3.60	1.52	moderately
3. Setting a maximum allowable number of foreign students	2.20	1.64	none
4. Requiring a min or max work credits per semester	4.20	0.84	moderately
5. Payment of additional fees for foreign students	4.40	0.89	moderately
6. Adherence to the study plan of the whole program	4.00	1.00	moderately
7. Length of residence	3.40	1.52	slightly
8. Signing of contract or agreement provision of additional support services			
· Academic support services	2.20	1.64	none
· Language support services	2.20	1.64	none
· Accommodation and housing services	3.20	1.64	slightly
· Social and cultural integration support	2.40	1.52	none
Subtotal	2.50	1.41	none
9. Credit transfer from the country of origin	4.60	0.55	strictly

10. Regular monitoring of the foreign students	3.80	1.64	moderately
Total	3.69	0.69	moderately

4.3 Qualitative Results on the Implementation of ISM Policies in Public Universities

Qualitative data were obtained from interviews of 9 administrators of public universities and from the focus group discussion. Briefly, the public university administrators viewed their international programs as an excellent opportunity for foreign students to have experience abroad and have a better perspective of global business. It was their mission to ensure that their programs meet international standards. The institutions saw that their programs would increase the school's reputation, enrich cultural exchange among the student body, and widen the variety of the offered courses at the international standards. To attend the programs, the students need to meet minimum requirements, such as finishing grade 12 with a diploma. Concerns regarding ISM for the public universities include the uncertainties of sufficient funding to open new international programs. This factor delayed the recruitment process of highly qualified professors to join the international colleges. There was also a public misconception that the universities may have limited potential to offer high quality international graduate programs. Some universities did not have sufficient funding, management, and manpower to open an English MA or Ph.D. program. The administrators suggested that the government should form an ISM committee to discuss ISM policies, as well as provide more financial support for the international programs. In terms of the policy reforms at the institutional levels, they suggested that the activities that better network the international and Thai students should be encouraged. They also suggested putting up a center to assist foreign students and to serve as a place for networking with Thai students.

4.4 The Implementation of the National ISM Policies in Private Universities

To obtain the quantitative data, 8 administrators from private universities were given a questionnaire on how strictly the national and institutional policies were implemented at their institutions. The obtained data indicated that the national policies were strictly implemented ($\bar{x}$ = 4.57). Out of the seven policies surveyed, five received the average score higher than 4.50, indicating that they were strictly implemented. These include the policies on the accreditation of the programs that can accept foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 4.88), the authorization by the Bureau of Immigration for HEI to accept foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 4.62), equivalency and recognition of 11th and 12th years of secondary education taken in the country of origin ($\bar{x}$ = 4.75), processing of student visas or study permits ($\bar{x}$ = 4.75), and the monitoring of the foreign students by the Bureau of Immigration ($\bar{x}$ = 4.62). Two policies that were moderately implemented are regulation of foreign students in specific disciplines ($\bar{x}$ = 4.38) and on customizing the curriculum implementation to the needs of the foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 4.00).

Table 3 Means and S.D. of national policies in private universities (N=8)

National policies	Means	S.D.	Implementation
1. Accreditation of the programs that can accept foreign students	4.88	0.35	strictly
2. Authorization by the Bureau of Immigration for HEI to accept foreign students	4.62	0.52	strictly
3. Regulation of foreign students in specific disciplines	4.38	0.52	moderately
4. Customizing the curriculum implementation to the needs of the foreign student	4.00	1.31	moderately
5. Equivalency and recognition of 11th and 12th years of secondary education taken in the country of origin	4.75	0.70	strictly
6. Processing of student visa or study permit	4.75	0.46	strictly
7. Monitoring of the foreign students by the Bureau of Immigration	4.62	0.57	strictly
Total	4.57	0.43	strictly

4.5 The Implementation of the Institutional ISM Policies in Private Universities

For the institutional policies, the private universities implemented the policies moderately ($\bar{x}$ = 4.10). Out of 10 policies surveyed, five were strictly implemented, three were moderately implemented, and

two were slightly implemented. Unlike the public universities, none of the institutional policies were not implemented in the private universities. The institutional policy that received the highest score was on the credit transfer from the institution at the country of origin ($\bar{x}$ = 4.75), indicating that it was strictly implemented. Other policies that were strictly implemented were the policies on the submission of the admission requirements ($\bar{x}$ = 4.60), the admission of students in any discipline ($\bar{x}$ = 4.63), the adherence to the study plan of the whole program ($\bar{x}$ = 4.63), and the regular monitoring of the foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 4.63). The three policies that were moderately implemented include the policies on requiring a minimum or maximum work credits per semester ($\bar{x}$ = 4.00), the length of residence ($\bar{x}$ = 4.25), and the signing of a contract or agreement provision of additional support services ($\bar{x}$ = 3.90). Lastly, the two policies that were only slightly implemented in the private universities were the policies on setting a maximum allowable number of foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 2.75), and the payment of additional fees for foreign students ($\bar{x}$ = 2.88).

Table 4 Means and S.D. of institutional policy implementation in private universities (N=8)

Institutional policies	Mean	S.D.	Implementation
1. Submission of the following admission requirements			
· Proof of completion of relevant academic degree or academic preparation	5.00	0.00	strictly
· Certification of English Proficiency	4.63	0.74	strictly
· Recommendation for international study	3.75	1.28	moderately
· Student visa or special study permit	4.75	0.46	strictly
· Authorization from the Bureau of Immigration	4.88	0.35	strictly
Subtotal	4.60	0.32	strictly
2. Admission of students in any discipline	4.63	0.52	strictly
3. Setting a maximum allowable number of foreign students	2.75	1.39	slightly
4. Requiring a min or max work credits per semester	4.00	1.60	moderately
5. Payment of additional fees for foreign students	2.88	1.46	slightly
6. Adherence to the study plan of the whole program	4.63	0.52	strictly
7. Length of residence	4.25	0.89	moderately
8. Signing of contract or agreement Provision of additional support services			
· Academic support services	3.75	1.58	moderately
· Language support services	3.75	1.58	moderately
· Accommodation and housing services	3.88	1.36	moderately
· Social and cultural integration support services	4.25	1.16	moderately
Subtotal	3.90	1.24	moderately
9. Credit transfer from the country of origin	4.75	0.46	strictly
10. Regular monitoring of the foreign students	4.63	0.74	strictly
Total	4.10	0.63	moderately

4.6 Qualitative Results on the Implementation of ISM Policies in Private Universities

The qualitative data from unstructured interviews of 8 private university administrators together with data from the focus group discussion indicated that the private universities viewed that the international programs provide a good opportunity for the institutions to improve their educational programs. Aside from providing opportunities for students to exchange cultures and language experiences, the international programs also increase incomes for the institutions, which would lead to funding for facility upgrades. The institution policies and corresponding practices were similar in public and private universities. For example, they similarly required students to meet a minimum standard of English language requirement. The visa processes were similarly structured. One of the major concerns of the private universities was on the requirement for the institutions to conduct research to meet the standards given by the Higher Education Commission. They found it difficult to meet this requirement due to the lack of time and funding. As one of the solutions, they suggested that the government may act as a major player in conducting educational research and transferring technology to their institutions. Another concern of the

private universities involves the increasing demands for on-campus housing. They also viewed that English proficiency still needed improvement. A campus-wide English-speaking environment, if promoted, would help to improve the students' English proficiency. Lastly, they viewed that the hiring process of the instructors and staff needed to be reformed in order to have highly qualified staff to better their educational programs. Instructors who can teach fluently in English are in a high demand.

4.7 A Model Framework on ISM for Higher Education Institutions in Thailand

With the information on the assessment on national policies, institutional policies, a focus group and interviews made on the institution leaders/administrators both from the public and private universities, the model framework was formulated. As shown in Figure 1, there are currently existing national ISM policies, but to reform national ISM policies, several recommended policies are proposed. The most important proposed policy is on setting a clear policy on ISM for higher education by the government. This may involve establishing a national ISM committee. Other activities that would better network foreign and Thai institutions are also recommended. It is also proposed that there should be more funding toward improving ISM, as well as a more convenient and simpler visa process and opportunities for international students to participate in some national events. Herein, the researchers proposed that the ISM reform at the national level starts with an establishment of ISM secretariat office, who then can propose a national ISM committee with representatives from public and private universities. This committee shall propose a clear statement to the government on the ISM policy to gain governmental support.

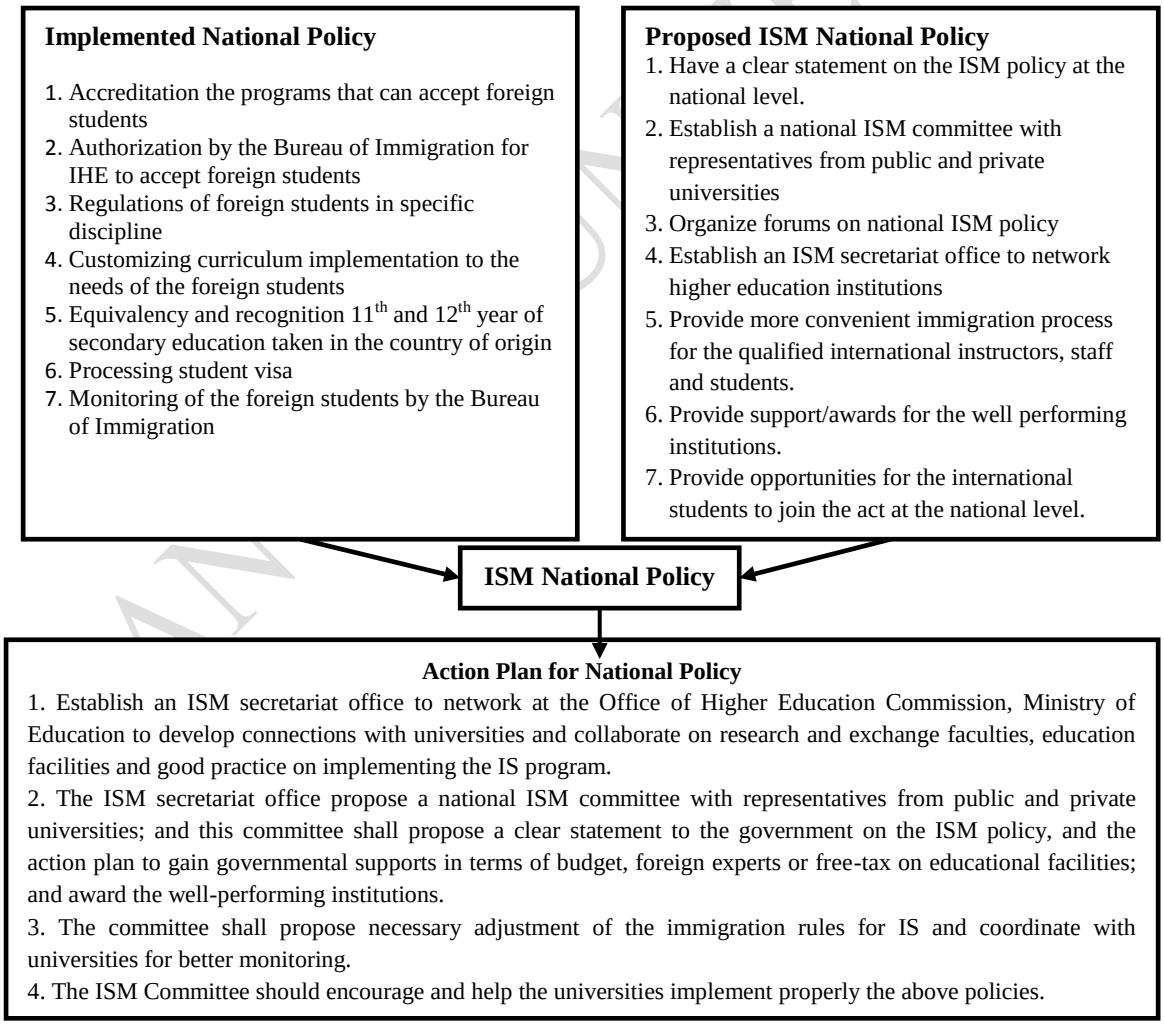

Figure 1 A proposed ISM model framework for national policies based on the comments and suggestions of stakeholders

4.8 Model Framework and Action Plan for Thai Universities

At the institutional levels, the researchers developed a model framework for improving ISM (Figure 2). Besides the existing policies that are already implemented in the public universities, additional policies are proposed in this model framework, including ensuring that the universities have international programs with instructors with high English proficiency. The other policies recommended are on providing more assistance to the international students in terms of language, housing, social and cultural integration. The action plan to improve ISM in Thai universities may involve setting up the international education committee which includes representatives from each faculty. This office should play a part in ensuring that the staff and faculties in the international programs have high English efficiency, and forms networks between the international colleges. Other activities that the office may initiate include creating an international environment, such as English signs and signages and use more English language on campus, developing international student manuals.

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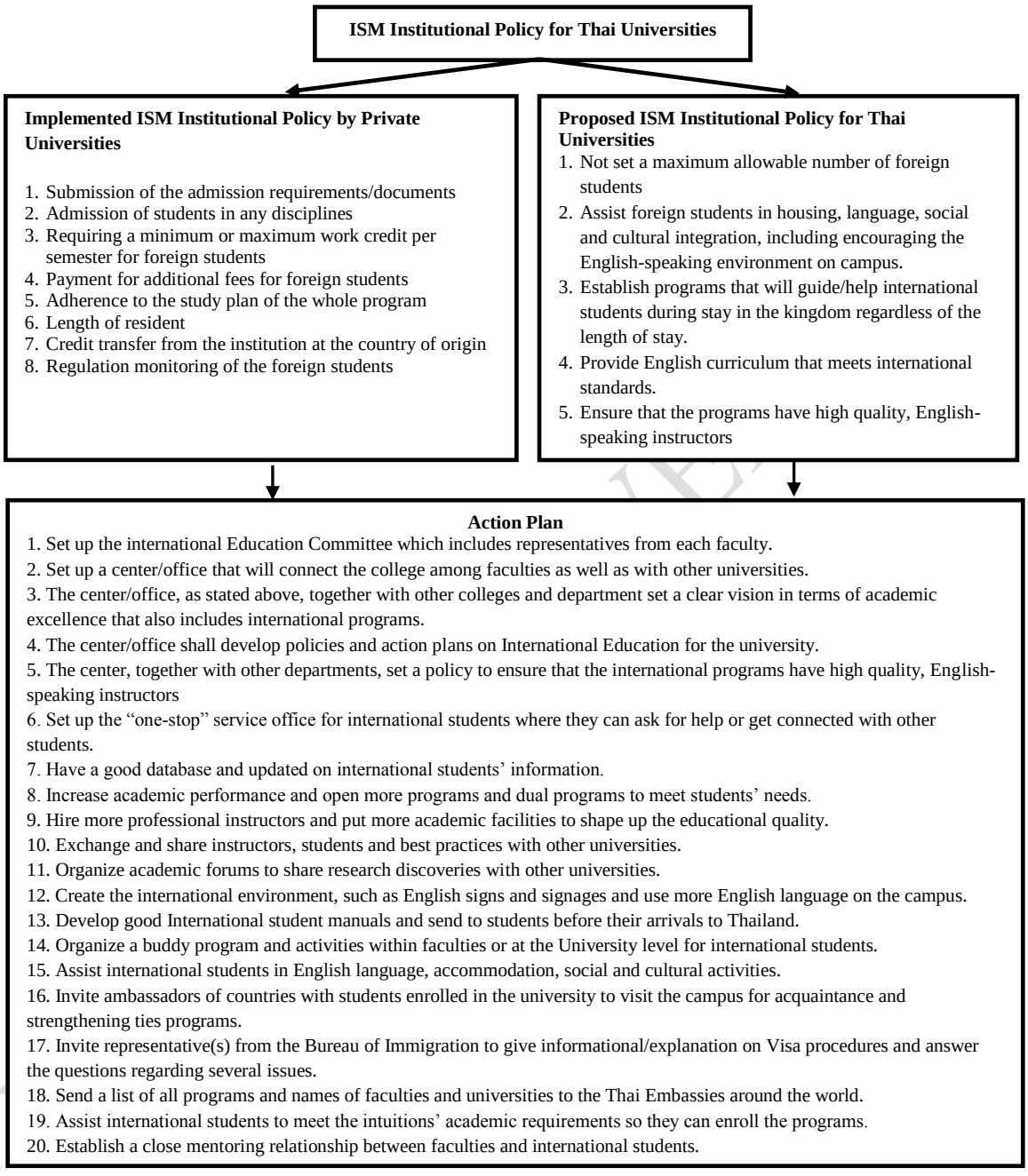

Figure 2 A proposed ISM model framework for Thai universities

5. Conclusion

Based on the data obtained, the researchers developed a model framework and action plans to improve ISM in higher education institutions in Thailand. The researchers suggest that working committees should be formed both at the national and institutional levels. While the national ISM committee should consist of representatives from the government sector, public and private universities, the institution ISM committee may involve representatives from each faculty in the university. These committees should play an integral part in setting a clear direction on ISM policies, as well as serving as the main facilitators to create networks among parties and hosting activities to promote ISM.

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