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Delivering Academic Service at Regional Level: a Comparative Study of American and Thai Academic Staff (0084)

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The economic impact of higher education within regions is widely recognised. However, little is known about how such work is viewed by academic staff or about the impact on career development. This is a comparative study of American and Thai staff performing academic service to fulfil the regional engagement of their universities. The role of public universities in the social and economic development of their geographic proximities has been studied in both developed and developing countries. However, most studies focus on regional engagement in national or local policy making or at institutional level. This study is distinctive by concentrating on the academic staff themselves. The paper considers the perceptions and experiences of individual academics in seeking to satisfy regional engagement within their academic work. A comparative approach was adopted to explore whether such attitudes varied according to the contrasting academic, social, cultural and historical context of different countries.

Outline

Research Questions

This paper addresses two key research questions:

- 1) How is regional engagement conceived and perceived by American and Thai academic staff?
- 2) What comparisons can be made between the work of academic staff from these developed and developing systems, with particular reference to the service function of public universities?

Literature Review

Working within a knowledge economy, universities are expected to proactively facilitate the operation of knowledge transfer and innovation systems (Caraca *et al.*, 2009). Although academic staff involvement is regarded as an essential feature of such engagement, existing literature contains very little research on the perceptions and experiences of individual academics at an operational level (Gunasekara, 2006).

Holland (1997, p.5) suggests that academic involvement in service is based on individual behaviours and time choices made by academic staff, arguing that such involvement is 'a reflection of their personal adoption of service as a component of their professional work'. Literature on the role of universities in knowledge regions shows three fundamental factors relating to the involvement of academic staff. The first factor is academic understanding of the university's geographic proximity

which is assumed to be the service territory (see also Boucher *et al.*, 2003; Charles, 2003). The second factor relates to the nature of university organization which is assumed to shape academic ideas about the regional agenda, the service mission and approaches to knowledge transfer and is believed to influence the 'context beliefs' of the academic (Colbeck and Michael, 2006, pp.20-21). Finally, the third factor is the academic's view and beliefs regarding the culture of the academic heartland and academic freedom, and assumed to influence the choice of the time invested in diverse activities within academic work (Boyer, 1996, Holland, 1997).

Research method

The research project was a multi-site case study. To examine the influences concerning different systems, two selected universities were from the US and three from Thailand. Two universities were urban universities located in metropolitan cities (Bangkok, Thailand, and Seattle, Washington, USA) whereas the other three were from peripheral geographic cities of Chiang Mai (Thailand), Song Kla (Thailand) and Chapel Hill (North Carolina, USA).

To ensure effective comparison of academic activities, all five selected universities were large public 4-year universities providing comprehensive degree-level programmes with the doctoral degree as the highest level. These universities were among the leading universities in their systems (Carnegie classification of institutions of higher education, 2007; CHE, 2007).

A grounded theory approach was chosen. The study was carried out qualitatively using semi-structured interviews and institutional document analysis data collection. 34 members of academic staff were interviewed, including six academic managers. The interview participants were not representative of the academic populations of American and Thai universities (Dey, 2004); they were sampled purposively to ensure a wide range of academics with diverse qualifications, disciplines and backgrounds.

The main research findings may be summarised as follows:

1. Academic Service to the Geographic Proximity

Working in a more developed higher education system with a strong knowledge economy does not imply that academic staff have a better understanding of their role in serving the region than those working in developing system.

Most of the American academics interviewed perceived service to the region as a part of their community service. The significance of this work was relatively low in their workload report template compared with administrative service and professional service. Similarly, in Thailand, academic service was regarded as voluntary work listed in the workload report template of academic staff.

2. University organization

The notion of a knowledge society is well understood at the policy making level. The production and provision of new knowledge is based on the specific 'material' and 'non-material assets' of their specific proximity in order to promote the competitive advantage of the knowledge region (Chatterton and Goddard, 2000, p.478).

Universities in both systems have developed their service mission and their organizational structure to promote service activities attached to mainstream teaching and research. However, such activity is normally seen to complement teaching and research, as a secondary rather than as a primary driver of organisational function and design.

3. Individual Choice of Personal Goal and Time Invested in Service

Despite the widely held perception of academic service as less significant in academic evaluation and career development, the paper shows that service to the region was often undertaken by senior academics. There is also evidence that such staff, with experience and seniority, manage their efforts more productively than junior staff. Commonly, the service to the region they performed would eventually benefit several other academic work purposes and vice versa; this is known as integrated academic work (Colbeck, 2002).

The paper highlights comparisons between American and Thai academics. Staff in American universities tended to be involved systematically in service activities through formal channels of involvement and normally performed such work with the university's full recognition. Also, most examples of regional involvement were based around research and were supported from a wide range of research funding sources.

By contrast, academic staff in Thai universities mainly followed personal connections, and worked on an informal basis, with significantly less research activities. These differences may be explained by the contrasting qualities of organisation and information management and by the relative capabilities of academic staff.

Significance of the Outcomes

Taking into account the material and non-material assets existing within a university's geographic proximity, competitive advantage of the regional economy could be enhanced if the university proactively develops its work with knowledge transfer and regional innovation systems.

With an effective university organization supplemented by the skills and commitment of academic members, the performance of academic service in the developed US system appeared to be more systematic and productive than in the developing Thai system.

This research leads to reconsideration of how a knowledge society may emerge in developing systems, such as Thailand, and about the priorities of these developing systems in building knowledge regions. New light is shed on the formation and delivery of regional missions in higher education, and on organizational structures, career development, academic cultures and work experiences of academic staff.

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