

Higher Education in Thailand and Its
Influential Context for Thai Tertiary Students

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิชาการเรื่องนี้มุ่งนำเสนอข้อมูลเกี่ยวกับระบบการอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทย ซึ่งจัดเป็นส่วนหนึ่งที่สำคัญยิ่งของบริบททางวัฒนธรรมไทย เนื้อหาในบทความเรื่องนี้ได้มุ่งพิจารณาให้เห็นถึงรากฐานสำคัญของการศึกษาในประเทศไทย ตั้งแต่ประวัติความเป็นมา ระบบการรับสมัครและการคัดเลือกนักศึกษาให้เข้าศึกษาต่อในระดับอุดมศึกษา นอกจากนี้เนื้อหาและบทวิเคราะห์ยังได้มุ่งเน้นนำเสนอที่เฉพาะเจาะจงถึงบริบทด้านวิถีชีวิต และเส้นทางทางการศึกษาของนักศึกษาไทย ซึ่งประกอบด้วยเรื่องทรัพยากรทางการศึกษา สิ่งอำนวยความสะดวกและแหล่งทรัพยากร งบประมาณและนโยบาย สิ่งแวดล้อมทางกายภาพของมหาวิทยาลัย และกลยุทธ์การประเมินผลในระดับอุดมศึกษาของไทย บทสรุปสุดท้ายที่ได้จากการวิเคราะห์ในบทความเรื่องนี้คือข้อกังวลที่เกี่ยวข้องเกี่ยวกับวัฒนธรรมการเรียนรู้ของนักศึกษา โดยได้ตั้งคำถามเพื่อฝากให้คิดต่อไปยังตัวนักศึกษาและสถาบันการศึกษาของไทยอีกด้วย

Abstract

This paper gives insights into the higher education system in Thailand, which is widely interpreted as a significant part of Thai culture in particular. The paper includes a consideration of the place of education in Thailand, including its history and the University admission system in Thailand. It also provides more specific insights into the lives of Thai students and their educational paths, by looking through the lens of academic resources, facilities, finance and policy, physical environment, and assessment strategies in Thai higher education. The paper ends with a slight concern about students' learning culture that raises the questions for Thai students, and their institutions.

Thai's Education Pathways to the Present

The history of higher education or University level in Thailand can be traced back one hundred years to a period of modernisation, when the country “needed to develop” itself “dramatically” to deal with the changes taking place nearby by “western superpowers” and to maintain its “sovereignty” (Sangnapaboworn, 2003). The primary purposes of University education then were to cultivate intellectuality in the Thai young and to equip people with modern knowledge so that they could serve in the government services and further the modernisation of the nation (Chantavanich & Fry, 1988).

Thailand may appear to have systematically adopted its higher education philosophy and system from western countries. Yet in reality King Chulalongkorn, who established Chulalongkorn University in 1917, the first public University in Thailand, had clearly shown his intention was to cultivate a consciousness of being Thai along with the acquisition of modern knowledge in the young men who attended his University. King Chulalongkorn “is regarded as one of the most resourceful monarchs, who changed Siam [later renamed Thailand] into a modern state” (Debyasuvam, 1981 p. 83). He had always been acutely aware that the Kingdom of Siam needed to adopt the western advances in knowledge and technology associated with rational, careful, and critical examination. He proclaimed:

...modernisation could be achieved without adversely affecting Siamese identity and eventually could serve to strengthen national identity and solidarity in ways responsive to both local traditions and to the challenges presented by the West... (Fry, 2002a p. 8).

The King's initiatives in education were designed to produce a mixture of Thai national sentiment (the promotion of Thai ideas) and Western ideas. The “conservation” and “transmission of national heritage” including “history”, “culture”, “social values”, and “religion” were emphasised (Tongsopit, 1991 p. 777). Some of the obvious evidence of these attempts are visible in this University's Thai-style architecture and the academic gown, designed according to the King's own initiative. Courses in Thai arts, literature, language, history, and Buddhism were also offered in the University together with other subjects adopted from western countries (Sangnapaboworn, 2003). Significantly, the King emphasised that this University was established not only for elites, but for all Thai citizens, regardless of social status (Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2000). This also links with ideas of Western modernity– equality and equal opportunity, shift in understanding of the role of “poor” in the state. During its initial period of existence, Chulalongkorn University's curriculum in most fields was patterned after English models and the standard teaching method was based on lectures (Sinlarat, 1973). The main purpose of the University was also particularly oriented toward teaching rather than the type of knowledge production, that is currently defined as research (Sinlarat, 2004).

When Thailand changed from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in 1932, a shortage of political leaders and civil servants who were knowledgeable about the principles and application of democracy led the government to establish a second public University named Thammasat University (The University of Moral and Political Science) in 1933 (Office of the National Education Commission, 1991). Three more public

universities in Bangkok were founded in 1943, namely, Mahidol University (University of Medical Science), Kasetsart University (University of Agriculture) and Silpakorn University (University of Fine Art). These universities also placed greater emphasis on teaching than on research. The curriculum and the teaching were oriented toward the “professions” rather than toward “scholarly inquiry” (Sinlarat, 2004 p. 206). Teaching, learning and examination emphasised memorisation and grading was based on percentage marks as in Europe (Sinlarat, 1973).

In order to counteract the concentration of economic activities in the capital, three regional universities were established in the 1960s: Chiang Mai University in the North, KhonKaen University in the Northeast and Prince of Songkla University in the South. Academic diversification towards technical colleges appeared on the agenda in the 1970s when accelerated industrialisation led to a first labour shortage in science and technology (Ministry of University Affairs, 2002).

At the same time, a shift from elite to mass higher education was marked by the foundation of open universities and distance learning institutes. These open universities have different and more flexible admission policies. The establishment of open universities increased the proportion of students from non-elite backgrounds. In 1971, Thailand’s first Open University, Ramkhamhaeng University was founded. This University utilises an open-admission system that requires no examinations and attendance is not compulsory, but classroom facilities are made available. It provides an effective and economical way to respond to the public demand for opportunity in higher education. Eight year later (1979), the second Open University, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University was established. Instead of providing facilities as Ramkhamhaeng University does, Sukhothai Thammathirat adopts a distance learning and teaching system at various study centres throughout the country (Ministry of University Affairs, 2002).

Private sector participation in national higher education was first initiated in 1969 with the passage of the *Private Institute Act*. Later, in 1979, this *Act* was changed to the *Act of Private Higher Education Institutions* (Bunnark, 199; Kulachol, 1995). Private higher education institutes have been established and operated under the close supervision of the Ministry of University Affairs. The Sixth National Higher Development Plan (1989-1991) offered financial support to private institutes in order that they could provide higher standards of education (Ministry of University Affairs, 1998). The aims of privatisation are to encourage the private sector to provide University places for those who cannot get into public universities (Ministry of University Affairs, 1998). The shortage of University places is the result of public universities being able to accept only 25 percent of the students who undertake the Entrance Examination. Additionally, some of those excluded belonged to middle and upper class families who then chose to send their children abroad, which caused Thailand to lose money as fees were paid to educational institutions abroad (Kulachol, 1995). The Thai private universities offer both undergraduate and graduate programs, but not all of them have doctoral programs.

Even though Thailand has very few prestigious private universities, that offer a serious alternative to public universities, they have played a very important role in providing higher education during the last three decades. Typically, students who apply for the public universities apply for private universities as a backup option in case they fail to gain admission to the elite public institutions. Indeed the majority of students

in Thai private universities are those who failed to gain admission to the public institutions. However, as Thewphaingarm (1998) argues there are some students who choose the private universities “over” the public universities as “their first priority” (p. 24). The latest data shows that in the academic year of 2010, there were 183,870 students enrolled in the higher private institutions, compared to 347,215 students enrolled in the public institutions (Higher Educational Information, 2012a). The majority of students who enrol in private institutions usually come from middle or upper-class families, as the tuition fees at the private universities is more expensive than at the public universities (Bunnark 1991).

As such, according to the history and the operation of Thai University education, the Thai model of higher education was traditionally designed to meet the demand for professionals of the nation. The aim of universities consisted of producing educated people rather than creating academic knowledge.

The Shift in University Admission System

Thailand’s higher education system, divided until recently into a number of four to six-year universities depending upon the field of study and specialisation and approximately 40 teacher-training colleges, has been controlled by the government through a number of planning instruments (Ministry of University Affairs, 1998). In addition to University and teacher-training programs (now called Rajabhat universities), the government has a variety of professional training institutions (nursing, Buddhist, police and military academies) considered equivalent to the University degree (Hawley, 2004).

Previous to educational reform, Thailand’s selection and admission processes were often thought to be inefficient and to be biased in favour of particular social, ethnic and geographic groups and frequently students lacked appropriate academic preparation for tertiary study (Harman, 1994). Fry (2002) argued that there had been insufficient “incentives” to develop good teaching and teacher learning and problems related to access to quality education and “equity”, particularly at the upper secondary level (p. 3). Finally, according to Fry (2002) there had been the problem of traditional learning methods and their emphasis on rote learning.

As the number of applications greatly exceeds the number of student seats available, new forms of student selection for higher education were essential. According to the *National Education Act 1999*, the higher education reform was effective for the admission into the higher level of education (Sangnapaboworn, 2003). Successful educational reform in present-day Thailand stands for a new paradigm of educational admission systems. The provision contains a new design of assessment by which all aspects, not just memorisation, of students will be evaluated and their prior achievement is taken into account in terms of more innovative ways of assessing competence (Board of University Presidents of Thailand, 2003).

As for the structural reform, the *National Education Act* stipulated a shift from a centralised to a decentralised system. A decentralised network system of educational opportunities could be used as an adequate mechanism for the Thai society to cope with the challenges of the future. The decentralisation will result in a more responsive, efficient and effective system of educational management. The initiation of new university model, the *autonomous public university* is an example of this reform outcome. At present, there

are 15 Thai universities identified themselves to this model (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2012). These universities have more independent and freedom in power utilisation regarding university policy formulation and implementation. Most of them establish more study centres in various areas in order to offer more educational opportunities to Thai people. This operation could promote “life-long learning” in societies where the formal state system does not otherwise reach every “rural community”, “minority group” or “adult illiterate” (Witte, 2000 p. 240).

A Closer Look at the University

The government has always organised and controlled the education systems in Thailand. The key authority in the Thai University education is the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing Thai students at vocational and higher education levels to be professionals, modern citizens of the world with diverse skills, competitiveness in global markets, living in a knowledge-based society (Ministry of Education, 2012). Even though each University operates under a charter with some freedom in decision making, the Ministry of Education holds final power and so there is a uniformity to the universities and a top down management system. This has always been a challenge for higher education institutions in the country. The following sections discuss about academics resources, IT facilities, finance and policy, physical environment of the universities and assessment strategies in Thai higher education.

1) Academics Resources

Due to the rapid changes in information technology in the age of globalisation, the Thai government has acknowledged that its citizens need to develop skills and knowledge to adapt to a changing world (Office of the Education Council, 2004). In Thailand, there has been an increase in the number of people enrolled in educational institutions. However, the teaching and learning approaches of the institutions are still behind the latest trends and innovative research in teaching. Traditionally, the teacher acts as a transmitter of information to the student. The result of this form of learning may be that the knowledge provided may not necessarily be relevant to the needs of students (Fry, 2002). Even though the *1997 Constitution* and *1999 National Education Act* have provided guidelines for education reform in Thailand (Office of the Education Council, 2004), the actual process of change in the learning and teaching in the University can be challenging.

At present, there are 78 public universities and 70 private universities in Thailand (Higher Educational Information, 2012c). Among the public universities, there were 65 limited admission universities, two open admission universities, and 11 autonomous universities. Regarding their mission focused, Thai universities are categorised into 4 groups: graduates and research production; graduates and social development production; graduates and the development of art and culture production; and graduates production (Komchadluek, 2012).

According to the Higher Educational Information (2012a), there were over 332,000 new students enrolled in undergraduate degrees of year 2010. Because of this considerable growth in the number of

students attending the universities, the teaching resources, particularly the number of academic lecturers and their qualifications are a matter of concern. According to a report from the Office of the Education Council, the number of academics whose academic rank was a lecturer represented about 65 percent of the total, followed by assistant professors (22%), associate professors (12%), and about 1 per cent of the total were professors. A majority of the academics held a Bachelors degree (48%), followed by Masters degree (37%) and only 13 per cent had received a Doctoral degree (Higher Educational Information, 2012). These statistics clearly reflect the quality and the availability of academic resources at Thai universities. It would likely be difficult for the Thai University system to implement a policy with an emphasis on “producing knowledge-based research” (Sinlarat, 2004 p. 202) as the major proportion of University lecturers, that is more than half the faculty do not have sufficient academic or research qualifications.

2) Information Technology Facilities

In 1992, Thailand created the first leased-line connection to the internet. It was made to serve academic purposes. Local connections were established among Thai universities with support from the National Electronic Computing Technology Centre (NECTEC), a subsidiary of the National Scientific and Technology Development program of the ministry of science and technology. This system of educational electronic networking was called the Thai Social/Scientific Academic and Research Network (ThaiSARN). The network aimed to link all Thai universities together and encourage Thai scholars to communicate via computer with each other and with other academics throughout the world (thajchayapong, 1996).

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Master Plan for e- Education, Ministry of Education (B.E. 2550-2554) has it that ICT is for raising the quality of learning up to global competitiveness. This is to lift the standard of education administration and management, as well as the use of ICT and service providing. The ultimate goal is to create a society of wisdom and lifelong learning. This Master Plan formulates 3 strategies which are (a) to create opportunity, enhance ability, and raise E-learning standards, (b) to be a leader in ICT application for better efficiency in educational administration, management and service providing, and (c) to be a leader in the producing quality ICT personnel with a high potential (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Despite the Government's long effort in investing for the technology infrastructure, the developments have not covered the whole country, whether it be the access to the internet, bandwidth speed, or stability of the system (Pumipuntu, 2006). The survey illustrates that in 2007 approximately 20% of the overall population in Thailand or approximately 13.1 million people were internet users (Koanantakool, 2007). Of that number, only a 4.5% subscribed to broadband Internet (Laohajatsang, 2009).

E-learning has come in use in Thai higher education since the beginning of the 21st century. However, it was hardly recognised because there were some limitations during the time such as low transmission quality, inaccessibility to the Internet or difficult access to the Internet, and the low number of Internet users (Laohajatsang, 2009). The State was aware of these problems, hence, figured out the plans to have continuously developed the relevant infrastructure needed. As a result, today many universities are ready for this mode of teaching-learning (Laohajatsang, 2009). Online learning however is not in optimal use. According

to the research paper, e-Learning system is an addition to the mode of teaching. A 60% is used as Supplementary teaching media, another 30% as Complementary media (Sombuntham, 2008). Only 11 fields of study from 7 universities offer a complete degree program in e-Learning mode (Charmonman, 2006). Sloan-C defines Online Learning as learning in which the Internet is used in delivering at least 80% of the course content. By the term, many Thai higher education institutions cannot claim practitioners. The developmen

3) Finance and Policy

In Thai public universities, 70-80 percent of their budget comes from government funds. The universities are granted a budget not based on criteria related to their performance, but on incremental changes based on new study programs or research units (Schiller & Liefner, 2007) This is about to change since series of financial reforms in Thai public educational sector have been introduced and implemented in recent years. The goal of these reforms is to strengthen the academic capabilities and to establish market-coordinated higher education systems. The reforms contribute to a higher degree of self-governance of the universities, and affect the universities' policies relating to "teaching activities, research, and academic services" (Schiller & Liefner, 2007 p. 550). However, based on Silaporn Buasai's report on the Thailand Research Fund, Fry (2002) has argued that Thailand has committed a large amount of this funding to new buildings and land, rather than an "investment in people", "teacher learning" and "creative innovative research" (p. 8).

Nevertheless, at the level of the individual there is an emphasis on the government financial policy that supports students. The government provides student loans to escalate the enrolment rate in Thai higher education. According to Sangnapaboworn's (2003) study, most higher education institutions (44%) are concentrated around Bangkok metropolitan areas. These institutions have provided access to higher education for students in Bangkok at twice the rate for other provinces. The majority of higher education students (70%) are from families with good economic backgrounds.

However, there are a growing number of students from low-income families, who have benefited from the *Education Loan Fund* supported by the government. The student loan scheme, which began operation in 1996, is highly subsidised through extremely favourable repayment conditions. It covers tertiary education, comprising public and private universities, Rajabhat universities and technical institutes. The central objective of the scheme is to increase "the educational opportunities of students from low-income families", to maintain student enrolments and to prevent student dropout of the education system. It plays a major part in solving existing problems of educational "inequality" within society (Ziderman, 2002 p. 370). In addition, the government also provided scholarships for almost 1,000 bright but disadvantaged students each year by using the profits derived from the government's lottery.

4) Physical Environment of the Universities

Thai higher education programs are carried out through campus-based study. Students enrolling in an undergraduate program are required to attend daytime classes normally between 20 to 25 hours per week. It is compulsory that the students attend classes regularly; failing to do so can lead to being disqualified from taking the examination in the course subject. Postgraduate programs organise the classes at day time

or night time between 6 and 9 pm. The postgraduate students are expected to attend between 9 and 12 hours of classes per week. Thai universities also have a policy that restricts use of universities' properties. Teachers and students are not allowed to stay or enter in the University campus and building after a certain time, especially at night. Given that the campus is not a 24-hour place, students need to have other places to study.

5) Assessment Strategies in Thai Higher Education

"Educational institutions shall assess learners' performance through observation of their development; personal conduct; learning behaviour; participation in activities and results of the tests accompanying the teaching-learning process commensurate with the different levels and types of education" (Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC), 1999, Section 26).

Assessment strategies have a significant impact on students' learning activity and the approach they adopt towards their learning (Susan & Peter, 2007 p. 16). As outlined in the National Education Act, universities in Thailand apply various forms of assessment procedures with regard to evaluation of processes and products of learning (Tepsuriwong & Srisunakruea, 2009). According to data on Bangkok University TQF (Department of Curriculum and General Education Courses Management, 2010), every programme allocates about 5-10 percent of the total score for attendance and participation. The proportion of formative and summative assessment varies from programme to programme. Throughout a programme, different forms of formative assessments; such as individual/small group work and in-class/homework assignments are carried out to provide opportunities for providing ongoing feedback and evaluation of students' learning performance. Students' overall achievement is evaluated at the end of a programme or each module by using summative assessments appearing in the form of tests, mid-terms, and final examinations.

Conclusion

Overall, this paper describes the cultural and intellectual logic of the education system in which Thais are learning. Universities in Thailand are important social institutions that pass on the traditions, culture, values and educational mores to Thai students from generation to generation. As the demands for a professional job increase, it is widely recognised that a higher degree is essential for improving social status and increasing career opportunities. This creates a slight concern about students' learning culture. The questions here are whether Thai students have critical and practical ideas about how they should be taught, and also how institutions could help them to achieve deep learning and acquire knowledge rather than just practical skills.

In doing so, we should focus on pedagogy and teaching in the Thai educational system. The concern of this paper has raised the issue of what type of scholar is being produced in the Thai culture and educational

system. Therefore, further plan and action on how the curricula in Thai education should be (re) designed to engender in students the possibility of productively taking advantage of their educational paths and learning benefits is imperative. Furthermore, a strategic and action plan for the upcoming ASEAN community should also be formulated. The plan should focus on education by promoting literacy, investment in human resources development by promoting English teaching, teacher development with networks throughout the ASEAN member countries and development of learning and teaching materials through the use of ICT and a proper learning environment in the university.

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Higher Education in Thailand and Its Influential Context for Thai Tertiary Students

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บทความเรื่อง Higher education in Thailand and its influential context for Thai tertiary students มีลักษณะเป็นบทความเชิงการแสดงทัศนะของผู้เขียนต่อการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษาของไทย ผู้เขียนได้นำเสนอประวัติความเป็นมาของอุดมศึกษาของไทย ทั้งสถาบันของรัฐและเอกชน และสภาพของการจัดการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษาของประเทศไทยในปัจจุบัน

เนื่องจากบทความชิ้นนี้ไม่ได้มีฐานจากงานวิจัย ดังนั้นความสุ่มเสี่ยงของการนำเสนอจึงขาดข้อมูลเชิงประจักษ์ที่จะสนับสนุนการวิพากษ์วิจารณ์ ที่ครอบคลุมทั้งระบบของการจัดการศึกษา อาทิ ระบบการบริหารจัดการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษา ที่ยังไม่มีคำตอบของข้อดีข้อเสียของการออกนอกระบบราชการ หรือการคงอยู่กับระบบราชการที่ส่งผลอย่างไรต่อบุคลากรในฐานะผู้ปฏิบัติหรือนักศึกษาและผู้ปกครองในฐานะผู้รับบริการ เป็นต้น ระบบการประกันคุณภาพการจัดการศึกษา โดยเฉพาะในเรื่องกรอบมาตรฐานคุณวุฒิระดับอุดมศึกษาแห่งชาติ พ.ศ.2552 (Thai Qualification Framework for Higher Education (TQF)) ที่เป็นเรื่องที่ต้องรับฟังความเห็นจากนักวิชาการทั้งกลุ่มที่เห็นด้วยและไม่เห็นด้วย เป็นที่น่าเสียดายที่ไม่ปรากฏในบทความนี้ แต่อย่างไรก็ตามนับเป็นอีกมุมมองหนึ่งของนักวิชาการที่อยู่ในแวดวงของการศึกษาในระดับอุดมศึกษาที่มีต่อระบบการศึกษาในปัจจุบัน