

ANALYSIS OF HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY: A LOOK BACK AT TWO DECADES OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY IN THAILAND

บทวิเคราะห์นโยบายการอุดมศึกษา:
ย้อนมองสองทศวรรษนโยบายมหาวิทยาลัยในกำกับของรัฐ

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Abstract

The effort to transfer all Thai universities under the bureaucratic system to autonomous universities to promote university autonomy has been originally initiated by those in higher education arena. However, this paper argues that due to the different influential contexts, the concept of university autonomy and the ideologies dominated and developed from the beginning are inconsistent with those of later stages. Hence, this has led to resistances and struggles amongst interest groups including those who wished for it at the outset. Based on Vidovich's conceptual framework, this paper thus aims to analyse the policy process in relation to the ideologies dominating the policy, the role of the nation state, and the policy effects on universities. The paper finally concludes the extent the framework has offered the understanding of the development of the policy and its effects on Thai universities.

Keywords: Higher education policy, University autonomy

บทคัดย่อ

ความพยายามที่จะนำมหาวิทยาลัยไทยออกจากระบบการบริหารงานด้วยระบบราชการไปสู่ระบบการบริหารแบบในกำกับของรัฐนั้น เดิมเป็นความริเริ่มและผลักดันโดยผู้นำและบุคลากรในแวดวงการอุดมศึกษา อย่างไรก็ตาม บทวิเคราะห์นี้ซึ่งให้เห็นว่า เนื่องจากบริบทแวดล้อมในแต่ละช่วงของการพัฒนานโยบายนี้ได้เปลี่ยนไป ส่งผลให้แนวคิดตั้งต้นของมหาวิทยาลัยในกำกับของรัฐถูกปรับเปลี่ยนไปตามแนวคิดที่ทรงอิทธิพลในเวลาต่อๆ มา ด้วยเหตุนี้จึงนำไปสู่การต่อต้านและขัดแย้งของกลุ่มผลประโยชน์ทั้งหลายรวมถึงกลุ่มที่เรียกร้องให้มีการเปลี่ยนระบบในตอนแรก บทวิเคราะห์นี้ใช้กรอบความคิดของ Vidovich โดยมุ่งวิเคราะห์วิัฒนาการของนโยบาย โดยศึกษาแนวคิดต่างๆ (ideologies) ที่เป็นฐานคิดหรือกำหนดทิศทางนโยบาย บทบาทของรัฐชาติ (nation state) และผลกระทบต่อมหาวิทยาลัย

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ท้ายสุดบทความได้สรุปประเด็นที่ได้จากการใช้กรอบความคิดของ Vidovich ในการวิเคราะห์ซึ่งทำให้เห็นวิวัฒนาการนโยบายนี้รวมทั้งผลกระทบของนโยบายดังกล่าวต่อมหาวิทยาลัยไทย

คำสำคัญ: นโยบายการอุดมศึกษา มหาวิทยาลัยในกำกับของรัฐ

Introduction

The drive to convert all Thai universities under the bureaucratic system to promote autonomy and thus establish autonomous universities was originally initiated by those in the higher education arena. The movement promised effective universities as a result. However, this paper argues that due to the different influential contexts, the concept of university autonomy and the ideologies that dominated and were developed from the beginning are inconsistent with those of later stages. Hence, this has led to resistance and struggles amongst interest groups including those who wished for it at the outset. This paper thus aims to analyse the policy process in relation to the ideologies dominating the policy, the role of the state, and the policy effects on universities. The paper starts with the background of policy materials discussed in the analysis. Then, based on Vidovich's conceptual framework, the analysis begins with the first contexts of historical influence contexts that explain how the push towards university autonomy was primarily developed under political pressures. Then the paper proceeds to the second contexts of influence-contemporary ones consisting of political, global, economic and social factors that informed the gestation of the policy. The principal ideologies of the

policy and the role of the state are verified and discussed. The policy practices and effects then focus on how the dominant ideologies have affected the universities practices and the interest groups involved.

Background of relevant policy materials

This analysis draws upon three relevant policy materials displaying the manifestation of the policy process.

(1) The National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP)

This five-year plan is the national policy material which directs the country's development focusing on economic and social issues. Both government and state enterprise sectors are required to spell out the policies and prepare action plans accordingly. Thailand implemented the first NESDP during the years 1961-1966. Presently, the country has already completed the eleventh plan covering the years 2012 to 2016.

(2) Principles and practices of autonomous universities delivered after the economic recession in 1997.

This policy material was delivered as a guide for Thai universities to spell out the policy and prepare an action plan to become autonomous (The Office of Permanent Secretary, Ministry of University Affairs, 1998). It portrays

the imperative of the economic crisis at the time and the influence of managerialism.

(3) The Long Range Plan of higher education

This 15-year-plan for Thai universities, claimed by its workforce as a research-based plan, provides recommendations on Thai universities direction from 1991 to 2004 (Kirtikara, 2004). Since their workforces are the advocates of the university autonomy, the plan reflects the substantial effort to convert the state universities into autonomous universities.

Contexts of influence

Vidovich's framework is applied to the contexts of influence where the antecedents and pressures leading to the gestation of the policy are discussed under two headings: (a) historical contexts and (b) contemporary contexts.

(a) Historical contexts

Back in 1964, university autonomy had already been discussed among interest groups in Thailand. However, the movement towards university autonomy can well be observed in the early stage of democratization in Thailand in the 1970s. Thai universities, under the bureaucratic system, had been criticized for lack of freedom and efficiency in administering their own affairs. Thus the universities' capacity to fulfill their main goals: teaching, research and community service was diminished. Most especially concerning the community service, Thai universities were asked to address issues that occurred and provide independent guidance

to society. Nevertheless, under the bureaucratic system bound with regulations and being compliance-centred, it was more unlikely that independent guidance could be provided in the face of the political power at that time.

This was the case because in the early years of the democratisation process, the Thai political elites were exclusively dominated by military groups who came into politics through various coups, 'the norm for change of political leadership and government' (Bunbongkarn, 2004: 48). Meanwhile, universities, academics and students were the advocates of democracy who drew public attention to that way of thinking. It is argued that the university effort primarily originated in the attempt to escape from the pressure or power pressed upon university affairs by politicians in the early years of democratization in country. The effort thus has been influenced by professionalism as well as the need to develop the democratic capabilities of Thai higher education.

Regarding the regime of power, Clarke & Newman (1997) describe the bureau-professional relations or the 'traditional order' that illustrates the forms of organizational power bureaucracy: rule bound and compliance centred; professionalism standard oriented and self-regulating; politicians-dogmatic and interfering. In the case of Thai universities, the manifestations of the political control and interference were clearly observed in government leaders, such as Thanom Kittikajorn who came into politics through the 1947 coup, and who also took the position of Chulalongkorn University's president during his

premiership (Sribunsong, 2005). In contrast to the western world, such as in British universities, laws have secured their freedom of speech, expression, academics and academic tenure' (Barnes, 1999: 164). Moreover, the relationship between Thai universities and the government became worse and even more violent when the Thanom government tried to control the pro-democratic students uprising during 14-16 October 1973, one of the milestones in the democratization process in the country which resulted in a student and civilian massacre and the government's ultimate exile. Thus, their relationship manifests the struggle over power and control at the outset.

As regards the early effort to gain autonomy, it is argued that this effort has been influenced by professionalism practices and the attempt to gain a form of power based on authority delegation. According to Olssen, Codd & O'niell (2004), this form of power entrenches in an organization characterized by a principle of autonomy. Moreover, the idea of an autonomous practice suggested by professionalism is based upon the liberal conceptions of rights, freedom, and expertise. Professionalism puts emphasis on 'public interest' or the 'public good' and the practices conducted by peers. In addition, during the early stage of democratization, autonomy was an attempt to also develop democratic capabilities of universities to counteract the political pressure at the time.

Professionalism and the need to develop democratic capabilities have influenced the primary effort. If succeeded, higher education

could be more independent in its own affairs and capable of providing independent guidance for society as the 'public good'. However, the early effort only resulted in the establishment of a Ministry of University Affairs under which all universities have remained in the bureaucratic system.

(b) Contemporary contexts:

The contemporary contexts cover the 1980s up until 2006 during which influential and important activities related to the policy's development occurred. This discussion takes account of 1) political, 2) global, 3) economic, and 4) social factors, which are the key components that have influenced the gestation of this policy. However, due to the different contexts, the policy of university autonomy has been shaped by different ideologies and has conveyed different practices from the early effort to achieve university autonomy.

(1) Political factors

University autonomy has clearly become a policy agenda with the effort of one of its advocates, VichitSrisa-an, who was appointed the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of University Affairs (MUA) in 1986 in which he initiated and chaired the Long Range Plan of higher education. To provide the proactive plan for Thai higher education and address four main issues: equity, efficiency, excellence and internalization; research on policies was conducted covering the areas of the socio-economic environments of the country, future scenarios and changes. Based on this research, one recommendation, to the then government

was that, "...the state should reform the relationship between degree- level institutions and the state by developing state universities under the MUA to become autonomous, responsive, efficient and academically excellent" (Kirtikara, 2004: 11). It is evident that the new form of the relationship between the state and universities was requested to achieve the proactive plan.

The Long Range Plan by Vichit Srisa-an's team had considerable impact on the government's decision and later policies of higher education. For example, in 1991, the draft charter of the first autonomous university, Suranaree University of Technology was enacted during the Chartchai government. The decision was a political one since Nakornratchasima province, where the university is situated, was the government leader's electoral constituency. His decision served the local voters who wished for a university in their province. Vichit Srisa-an became the first president of the first autonomous university which had an autonomous system from the beginning. Accordingly, Taylor et al. (1997) point out that policies reflect voices and values of dominant groups as the results of political struggles.

The influences of the Long Range Plan can be observed also in the policy of the later government under Anand Panyarachun who emphasized the efficiency and the effectiveness of higher education administration. However, the government considered the transition to an autonomous system an alternative for universities. Despite no transition of the existing state universities, the second autonomous university was established in the South of

Thailand in 1992 with Vichit Srisa-an as president of the university. As regards the role of the state, at one time the university autonomy policy was exploited by the government for their political ends whereas, at another time under another government, it was just another option for state universities, and the then government acted as a neutral referee. The process has been highly politically dominated.

(2) Global factors

Global and economic factors are not only closely interconnected but they also play a significant role in this policy process. As Dale (1999: 2) argues the mechanisms through which globalization affects national policy are crucially important in defining the nature of that effect. He further contends that due to their independent influences on globalization effects, the delivery mechanisms are a crucial source of a diversity of globalization effects.

The globalization effects on this policy can mainly be observed in two subsequent phases, the early 1990s and the late 1990s, with two different delivery mechanisms. The first phase involved a research study for the Long Range Plan. Because the scope of the study covered future scenarios and changes in higher education, consequently, the development of this policy in the 1980s, to a considerably extent, was shaped by global circumstances, particularly the global economy which had indirectly affected education restructuring and state relationship in western societies during the decline of the Keynesian welfare-state (Dale, 1997; Olszen, Codd & O'Neill, 2004). The Western model with

the university's administration emphasis on decentralisation has been adopted as the model for future Thai universities as admitted by Kirtikara (2004).

According to Dale (1999), there are two broad forms of state reaction to changing circumstances: competition state and governance without government forms. The introduction of the university autonomy policy in the first phase was obviously in response to the global trends, that is to become more competitive by having a more flexible and effective management. However, it is argued that the global trends had not yet necessitated the implementation of the policy in the early 1990s, not from the views of the Thai government or those of universities. Rather, the government at that time found the policy could be implemented as an option for state universities. The delivery mechanism through which the external effects operated in this phase is considered 'borrowing' or 'copying'. It clearly explains the degree to which the policy was voluntarily accepted by the recipient universities.

However, in the latter phase, university autonomy policy was compulsory regarding the dimension of viability. It was involved with the different contexts from the former one: the economic factor-Asian economic crisis 1997, the incoming of the supranational organizations: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Both organisations "are involved in attempting to install governance without government" (Dale, 1999: 4) and they play the role of 'the collective capitalist state'

to ensure the advance of the capitalist system at global level by operating through conditionality, loans, debts, and other strategies" (Dale & Robertson, 2002: 14). Their emphases convey neo-liberalism and managerialism practices applied to global economy. Since the Thai government had accepted the IMF loans in order to reactivate the country's economy, it was required to conform to the two organization's conditions. The globalization effects on the country have thus been operated through an imposition mechanism. The university autonomy policy has thus become an urgent agenda that demands the restructuring of the existing state universities.

(3) Economic factors: the Asian economic crisis in 1997 and the supranational organizations

The economic factors had a critical impact on educational restructuring in Thailand and provided the answer as to why university autonomy was necessary at the time. The following will demonstrate the interconnection between global and economic factors which together are the catalysts of the implementation of university autonomy policy.

The south-east Asian financial crisis in 1997 resulted in business bankruptcies, recession and unemployment in many countries in the region including Thailand. The government of the time had to work with the IMF and the ADB to reform the battered economy. Regarding educational policies, one substantial change demonstrated was the restriction in higher education expenditure and a promotion of a

leaner governmental organization, the distinct manifestations of managerialism in Thai organization's management after the economic crisis (Thaipublica, 2012; Intagoon, 2014).

The state itself for the first time had to voluntarily surrender to global and economic forces by ceding its control over higher education. Dale & Robertson (2002: 15) point out that, "This cession of national power to supranational bodies is always justified in terms of the ultimate good of the national society".

In the case of Thailand, the cession was voluntary because the government had accepted the IMF and the ADB's loans which had brought a set of conditions requiring the state to provide social mechanisms for overseas investment in country. The IMF and the ADB, hence, emphasized why university autonomy and good governance were necessary at the time (Thaipublica, 2012; Intagoon, 2014). Consistent with the ADB's conditions, university autonomy was considered a solution to ease the burden of the government under the budget constraints. These economic and global factors were catalysts for the gestation of the policy. It is the manifestation of the extent their effects have on the capacity in making national policy independently by a nation state (Dale, 1999). The existing state universities have now been called to contribute to the country by transferring to an autonomous university system despite its unfavorable entailed practices.

(4) Social factors: social movements

It is argued here that the movements among interest groups are the manifestation of the

struggle for power and the need to participate in decision-making regarding concerned issues. The contested terrain and a struggle for power are evident throughout the process as indicated by Ozga (2000).

Among the competing groups are the Council of University Presidents of Thailand, the Council of University Administrative Staff of Thailand, the Council of the University Faculty Senates of Thailand and students. Their movements, represented in the forms of articles in newspapers, seminars, and demonstrations (Hoksuwan, 2000; Lorthirathorn, 2006) have revolved around two main concerns. First, because of the shift of power from the state to the president and administrative body in the university, there was a concern about the administrative body's domination leading to centralized power and corruption. Second, the domination of managerialism and neo-liberalism on the policy conveyed business practices (Currie & Newson, 1998) focusing on profit and practices contradictory to academic professionalism. Since the state itself has followed the global trend by changing from 'welfare state' to 'competition state', where innovation and profitability are emphasized (Cerny, 1990) universities thus shifted from public good to private good and also took on contradictory roles: a knowledge provider versus a profit maker.

The above concerns led to a request for the opinion of His Royal Highness King Rama IX, the last resort and the person most revered by Thais, on the transition of Chulalongkorn

University the oldest university. His Royal Highness suggested there should be public hearings on the issues with extensive consultation among all people involved from the university arena to the public (Lorthirathorn, 2006). The university hence has conducted research and widely consulted with all people involved.

Policy practices/effects

It is argued that the university autonomy policy has been shaped differently and influenced extensively by global and economic factors; the ideologies dominated by the policy entailing practices that are contradictory to academic practices influenced by the notion of professionalism. This neo-liberal policy thus has seen resistance mainly from university staff and students. Only one state university, the King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thonburi has claimed its complete transition to an autonomous university system; whereas, the remaining 24 state universities have still struggled over their given contexts since 1997. By the end of 2006, under the ninth NESDP (year 2002-2006), all state universities were to complete their transition.

To a considerable extent, the policy process portrays the split between policy making and policy implementation.

While the state has taken the role of 'steering' from a distance, universities have been left in contradictory contexts for the policy implementation. Thus, the following effects regarding the movements of the academic staff and students could occur.

First, the freedom in administering university affairs is one major purpose of the primary effort to achieve university autonomy. However, the effort may not be realized because the neo-liberal policy, which involves the new structure based on line management, requires contractual compliance by university staff (Olsson, Codd & O'Neill, 2004). It is only a shift from the compliance centred policy of the bureaucratic system (Clarke & Newman, 1997) to the contractual compliance policy of managerialism. Thus, in the new system, the problem of compliance does remain. Moreover, with market orientation, the university staff's freedom of speech or expression are more likely to be diminished or controlled if that will reveal internal problems and portray negative images of the university. The imperative of market orientation can be observed in the western countries' system as in New Zealand where teachers need to be responsive to the school's position in the marketplace and the school image is monitored at all times (Robertson & Dale, 2000). Academic freedom and opportunity to develop democratic capabilities are thus contracted under the new system.

Second, it's more likely that the state's decentralization focus of the policy could be abused by local implementation. According to Hofstede (1997) Thai society is found to have a high rate in the 'acceptance of power distance', that is Thais accept the unequal distribution of power. Also those in higher positions or with higher status are highly regarded or treated with high deference in all social relationships

(Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000: 192). It is more likely that the authority delegation could be directed to serve only the administrative body's preferences. For example, they may develop a draft charter according to their preferences. This may affect the accountability of resource allocation and equity in local implementation as concerned by other interest groups, especially, university academic staff (Lorthirathorn, 2006). Thus, the state may need to take the role of referee to ensure that interest groups' voices are heard during the drafting stage of a university charter.

Third, the new practices conveyed by the policy will erode the cultural values regarding teaching careers. In Thai society, the teaching profession has traditionally been held in high regard for the ethical role it has maintained. Teachers are expected not only to educate but also pass on the cultural values of society to the new generation. To a great extent, the cultural values have been formed by Buddhism, the major religion of the country, which emphasizes a caring rather than a competing mentality. As Nagapriya (2004) indicates, in the Buddhists' view the creative way of living is not only to be responsible for one's own self but also for others. This awareness makes Buddhists feel grateful and concerned about each other. The new practices involved with marketing and profit making have put university instructors in conflicting roles, and will consequently erode the cultural values of society as professional judgment becomes insignificant where market is emphasized.

Moreover, market and profit focuses could put pressure on the instructors who used to be concerned only with academic affairs. As Bottery (2000: 68) points out that "... wherever managerial and non-managerial relationships and values exist side by side, there will always be a tension between them."

University instructors have to take on the role of entrepreneur whose skills they are ill-equipped to handle (Green, 1997). The practices influenced by 'consumerism', 'entrepreneurism' and managerialism can thus result in low job satisfaction amongst the instructors and lead to early retirement and a shortage of academic staff. The mentioned practices can make the autonomous university system an unfavourable system for the academic profession.

As regards the students' situation, since the state considers higher education as a 'private good', students have to be responsible for their expenses. Thus a 'student loan's policy is a relevant policy, delivered in consistence with the university autonomy policy. 'Equality' for student's access to higher education seems to be a rhetoric masking state ignorance of entailed problems regarding the mobility of high-skilled professions such as doctors, dentists and nurses. In the past, the government supported the expenditure for educating the students in these fields so they would provide service in local health centres or their community after graduation. Despite such support, the distribution of health resources has not been satisfactory. The proportions of doctor per population are 1:924 in Bangkok and 1:3476 an average for

the whole country (Ministry of Public Health, 2008). Without state financial support, it is more likely that those in the health professions will look for job opportunities outside the country, and result in a shortage of health service professionals in the country while these high-skilled people become global economic resources.

The above effects are an example of both the present and anticipated consequences of the implementation of the policy. As Stewart Ranson (cited in Green, 1997: 186) puts it, “Education cannot ignore the realities of the global market. Nor can it surrender to global commodification”. It is a challenge for the state’s role to ensure that the main issues concerned by interest groups are taken into account. Without such guarantee by the state, the restructuring of Thai higher education could have been pursued at the expenses of underdevelopment of democratic capabilities, cultural values erosion and disadvantages for the

country for which the supranational organizations, the catalysts of the policy, may not assume responsibility.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the early effort to gain autonomy for universities has been influenced by the notion of professionalism and the need to develop democratic capabilities during the early democratization process in Thailand. However, due to contemporary contexts, especially political, global and economic factors, the university autonomy policy was later shaped by managerialism and neo-liberalism which consequently convey different practices for the policy implementation. Hence, it is recommended that the voices of all interest groups need to be heard and taken into account from the outset. Key mechanisms should also be in place in order to demonstrate how the autonomous system can be efficient and accountable for all involved.

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