

HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IN THAILAND: TOWARD QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Though the issue of higher education reform in Thailand has been raised for many years, it was not until the promulgation of the National Education Act in 1999 that the comprehensive reform including that of higher education really took place. In implementing the reform of higher education, Thailand has placed high importance on the reform of learning and teaching for improving students both in public and private institutions

Key words: Education Reform, Higher Education in Thailand.

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that the total intellectual assets of the country are defined by its people's intellectual capabilities. Education is an important apparatus to cultivate and enhance the intellectual capabilities of its citizens. Thailand has formulated a comprehensive education reform policy to redesign the country's education system in order to enable its citizens to display their creativity to the maximum possible extent and fully realize their potentials.

In 1999 the National Education Act was promulgated. Since then fundamental and progressive changes of various aspects have taken place at school level which provides 12 year basic education. According to the Act, learning reform is at the heart of all matters concerned in education

reform. It is stated that education should be based on the principle that all learners are capable of learning and self-development. The teaching-learning process shall aim at enabling learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potential. Such principle of learning reform is applied to not only basic education, which is defined by primary and secondary education, but also higher education.

2. Reform of Higher Education: A National Agenda

Higher Education is regarded as Thailand's highest level of education. It is also the center of various fields of knowledge and scholars. Therefore, higher education institutions are highly expected to take leadership in molding the country's future leaders, develop high-level technology for the acceleration of economic growth, deliver academic service to society, preserve and maintain the nation's art and culture. Moreover, they are expected to take leadership in showing right direction for the development of the country, give warning of crisis and solve problems for society.

The history of higher education in Thailand can be traced back to the modernization period almost one hundred years ago when the nation needed to adapt herself dramatically to cope with the changes brought along by western superpowers and to maintain its sovereignty. Systematically, Thailand may have adopted higher education philosophy and system from western nations, but in reality King Vajiravut who established Chulalongkorn University, the first university of Thailand, had clearly shown his intention to cultivate the consciousness of being Thai along with the modern knowledge in his young men. Some of the obvious evidences are the university's Thai style architecture and academic gown designed according to his own initiative. Courses of Thai arts, literature, language, history, and Buddhism were also offered in the university together with other subject matters adopted from western countries.

In the past century Thailand has dispatched quite a large number of bright young men and women to study abroad, mainly Europe and America. Those intellectuals have returned and contributed greatly to the development of the country and many of them have played an important roles key personnel and role models in higher education institutions, while pursuing academic excellence to meet international standard. However, like many other countries that began to reform their higher education to cope with the dramatic and rapid changes brought along by the twenty-first century, higher education in Thailand has also come to the critical situation that a comprehensive reform is needed for not only

its own survival but also its readiness to assume more significant roles and responsibilities that lie ahead.

When the economic crisis occurred in 1997, Thai society began to realize causes for the crisis such as people's insufficiency of educational attainment, and the deteriorating moral and social values that led to selfishness and corruption. Several questions were raised about the role of education in cultivating desirable citizens. There was a call for a new design of education that places more emphasis on the cultivation of knowledge along with morality in learners at all levels of the education system. Higher education is no exception. More than that, with the suggestion of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) the cabinet decided that all public universities must become autonomous for efficiency of administration. Furthermore, it was necessary to establish a system of quality assurance in higher education level in order to ensure higher education institutions responsibility, accountability, and transparency.

3. Situation and Problems

3.1 Access to Higher Education

The ratio of higher education students in Thailand compared to the age group of 18-21 years population in 2002 was only 27.4, which was relatively low, when compared to other Asian nations. The enrollment ratio at lower than degree level was 43.6% and at degree level 39.5%. Most higher education institutions are (44%) concentrated around Bangkok metropolitan areas, providing access to higher education for students in Bangkok two time more than other provinces. In addition to this, 70% of higher education students are from families of high income.

3.2 Quality of Teaching and learning

The teaching and learning in higher education institutions are perceived as having placed too much emphasis on memorization and contents, which do not relate to the real situation, labor demand and the development policy of the country. Students are not sufficiently cultivated with necessary skills for self-learning, critical thinking, problem solving and creative ability. According to the annual report by IMD, there has been a continuous decline in Thailand's international competitiveness. The ranking of overall competitiveness dropped from 29 in 1997 to 39 in 1998, 34 in 1999, and 33 in 2000, especially in the fields of science and technology. Needless to say, higher education is also responsible for the nation's declining competitiveness. The university entrance examination which has emphasized on the

memorization for a long time is perceived as one of the major causes for rote learning and students' low achievement in thinking ability and performance. Additionally, the research conducted by Chulalongkorn University also indicated that in some departments 30-40% of the students who got the seats by passing the entrance examination dropped *out because it was not their priority choice.*

3.3 The Unity of Policy

In the past, higher education institutions in Thailand were under the jurisdiction of several organizations. In 2000 there was a total number of 645 institutions:74 of them were under the Ministry of University Affairs,489 under the Ministry of Education, and 82 other specialized institutions under their ministries. The diversification of policies led to the differentiation of standards in various aspects among higher education institutions. In addition to this, there was mismatching of graduate profiles and market requirement, which implies that there is no unified national goal and that our human resource development is not in line with the needs of the country.

3.4 Investment in Higher education

The measures for allocation and utilization of resources for higher education institutions are not sufficient for them to develop innovations and pursue academic excellence.The budget allocated for higher education has been decreased year by year, from 17.2% in early 1990's to 16.4 % in late 1990's and 14.4% in 2002. Especially the amount of research subsidy in Thailand is relatively low when compared to other countries. Moreover, there was inequity in the allocation of budget for higher education institutions. Universities under the Ministry of University Affairs normally receive more amount of budget than those higher education institutions under the Ministry of Education and students from families of high income pay less tuition fees than those who are economically disadvantaged.

3.5 Quality and Development of Faculty Staff

Compared to other countries, Thai higher education institutions have produced very few number of innovations because there is not enough incentives and system to encourage faculty staff to conduct quality research. Most of all, many of them lack an opportunity to receive continual development. At present, only 28 % of faculty staff hold a Doctor's degree. In the year 2001 there were only 224 faculty staff who have conducted research of enough quality to be granted the title of full professors, which counts for only 0.9 % of the whole teaching staff.

3.6 Efficiency of Administration

Under the present bureaucratic system of administration, most public universities realized their inefficient management structure and limitation of management flexibility of the civil service work. Thus, public higher education institutions cannot adapt themselves in time to cope with the rapid changes. Compared to private higher education institutions, it is obvious that there is no optimum utilization of resources in public ones due to uncoordinated operation and duplication of work. These constraints made them unable to attract the best and the brightest lecturers. Accordingly, it is hard for public higher institutions to achieve academic excellence.

Further, there was yet no effective mechanism in monitoring and evaluating the performance of public higher education institutions to see their relevance to the country's development policy and plans.

3.7 Challenges and Rationale for Education Reform

Apart from the problems mentioned above, there are many challenges from both international and domestic changes that have put pressures on Thailand to reform higher education.

Firstly, there is a growing demand for higher education. With the provision of 12 year basic education, it is estimated that the number of upper secondary school graduates wishing to continue their study in higher education institutions will increase tremendously. More available seats are required to cope with the growing demand.

Secondly, with the advance of information technology and the transition into a knowledge-based society, the teaching style relying solely on lectures is no more effective. Higher education institutions need to redesign the teaching-learning approaches that will enable students to learn at all time and all places and cultivate them with the attitude and behavior of lifelong learning.

Thirdly, as leading agents in enhancing the country's competitiveness, higher education institutions need to enrich their research work both in quantity and quality and encourage the development of students' creativity and individuality so that they are high-quality human resources and contribute to the country's competitiveness.

Fourthly, the reduction of personnel in the government service system and the retirement of professors are forcing higher education institutions to restructure the organizations and administration system in

order to provide more flexibility and autonomy for efficiency in administration and for attracting more capable personnel to replace those retired professors.

Lastly, private universities have demonstrated high flexibility and effective management that contributed to their rapid growth in the past fifteen years. Such practice put challenges on public higher education to pursue their autonomy for more efficiency in management and to cope with the domestic competition. Office of the National Education Commission, as the country's educational policy making organization took leadership in conducting documentary research on higher education reform in foreign countries, namely, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the United States. The UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education also provided relevant information of international trend in higher education reform around the world.

Guidelines for Reform of Higher Education according to the National Education Act 1999 and Its Implementation are released by the authority. The Guidelines for reform of higher education according to law may be classified into two categories: learning reform for the improvement of learners' quality and structural reform for the efficiency of administration. As mentioned above, the National Education Act 1999 provided that educational institutes and agencies concerned need to provide substance and activities in line with the learners' interests and aptitudes bearing in mind individual difference. The ultimate goal of Thai education reform is to develop our future people who are well-rounded with competence, virtue and happiness.

Such provision may be mistaken as the measure applied to basic education only. However, higher education institutes can also benefit from the principle of learning reform as it encourages teaching staff to be facilitators of the learning activities in which lecturers and students can learn together. Research is perceived as a learning process for all learners which will engender productive habits such as searching for answers and facts, as a means to create a continuous thirst for knowledge. Moreover, students of higher education must be exposed to authentic situations with practical work which will expand their scope of learning from classroom to the real life. Equally important is the provision in the law that requires a new design of assessment by which all aspects, not just memorization, of students will be evaluated and their prior achievement is taken into account for the admission into the higher level of education.

Related to learning reform is the promotion of lifelong learning, an integrated scope of education which covers the formal, non-formal and informal education. The law also provided that these three types of education are transferable. Thus, there must be an appropriate transfer mechanisms such as credit systems and equivalency provisions in order to materialize the principle of lifelong learning.

Another point of concern in the law is the revitalization of Thai wisdom in the education system. Lessons from the past national development have shown that it has not been in line with the Thai way of life and Thai culture to the extent desired. The development of public education has followed the line of western countries. As a result, Thais had to face many problems in crises. The National Education Act 1999, therefore, has defined a framework for development of Thai wisdom as an integral part of Thai education system. Thai wisdom means the body of knowledge, ability, outstanding value and skills of the Thais inherited from experiences that are respectively preserved and transmitted through generations. It is accumulated as a common asset of the nation to help people solving problems, improving their quality of lives and creating the appropriate balance between their way of lives and environment.

Realizing the importance of Thai wisdom, office of the Education Council, Ministry of Education of Thailand, in collaboration with many public and private organizations, has made several attempts to establish and promote Thai wisdom into Thai education system, such as conducting research on Thai wisdom, honoring of the Thai wisdom holder as a wisdom teacher, promoting the integration of the Thai wisdom into education at both formal and non-formal education institutions. The reform of learning must go hand in hand with the evaluation of the quality of learning. The law, thus, requires that a system of Quality Assurance must be established to assure the quality of education provided by both basic and higher education institutions. As for the structural reform, the National Education Act stipulated that there will be a shift from the centralization to the decentralization system. The former Ministry of University Affairs which was responsible for higher education must be consolidated with the new Ministry of Education, which will formulate policy and plans, oversee, monitor, and evaluate the provision of education, and allocate financial resources to educational institutes.

Most of all, the Act allows higher education institutions to seek for an appropriate system of administration that will enhance their autonomy and be conducive to the improvement of the quality of learning and research in their respective institutions. Additionally, for public

higher education institutions which turn into juristic persons, they are given right to manage the utilization of their properties so as to effectively allocate and utilize financial resources according to their needs.

4. The Implementation of the National Education Act for Higher Education Reform

Following the promulgation of the National Education Act 1999, several efforts have been made to materialize the education reform in higher education. Office of Education Council, as a policy making organization, has conducted related research so as to propose a strategic plan to the cabinet and carry it into practice. Some of the research are ‘The New Model of Higher Education Administration’, ‘University Mapping’, ‘Financing Higher Education’ etc. Since the promulgation of the Act, though more time is required for the overall reform, some major changes have taken place as follows:

4.1 Reform of the Admission System

After an experiment for a period of time and the scrutiny by multi-level committee, finally the cabinet has approved the proposal of the new admission designed by the Special Task Force for Review of the Admission System to be officially implemented in the year 2006. The new admission system will be based on three indicators of achievement: 10% from high school grade point average (GPA) or percentile rank (PR), 40-90 % from the national test results operated by Office of the National Test and 0-50% from the examination results of three subjects operated by concerned departments. The new admission was aimed at eradicating rote learning and placing more importance to critical thinking, creativity, and authentic academic ability. The reform of the admission system is also expected to solve the problem of students’ dropout since Chulalongkorn University and Suranaree University of Technology found out in their research that the dropout rate of students who were directly admitted by their faculty of choice was lower than those who were given seats by the entrance examination. As a matter of fact, some higher education institutions have already initiated their own flexible admission system. Several universities have given priority seats to local graduates on quota basis. Especially, Suranaree University of Technology has given a special quota to students who have demonstrated great achievement in sports or have been outstanding athletes and provided them with special privilege such as an exemption of tuition fees, dormitory rent fee, an offering of special classes at appropriate time to help strengthen their academic ability, and other honorary awards.

4.2 Transfer of Credits

Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University have signed contract on academic cooperation conducive to sharing of their resources ranging from teaching staff and facilities to collaborative research. They also agreed to allow students of some designated departments to transfer credits interchangeably between the two universities.

4.3 Problem-based Learning

To promote the cultivation of students' intellectual creativity as they are powerful human resources for the development of the country, the Higher Education Commission has initiated several projects. The Best and Brightest Project encourages outstanding students to widen the scope of their vision by participating in the educational trip abroad so as to deepen their understanding about globalization, international exchange, technological advance, and how to develop Thailand in terms of economics, education, politics, art and culture in order to enhance competitiveness.

There is also a Research Project on Technology Transfer to Community which encourages faculty staff and students to transmit their knowledge, technology, and other resources to community in order to improve industrial and agricultural productivity for the strengths of community and well-being of people. Such cooperative development was expected to accelerate the transformation of community into a learning society where students, teaching staff and community people can learn together for the better of all concerned.

The project of "Learning together to strengthen community" initiated by the Higher Education Commission encourages students to experience learning and working with people in community so that students understand the real situation of society. In the mean time, students will conduct research to help solve the problems in community and find out what activities should be introduced to promote a learning community. During a summer vacation, students who wish to continue working in community will be paid as a part time job. By this way, students can earn income and at the same time enhance their knowledge by studying and working with community people.

4.4 Research Cooperation between Universities and Industry

In the mean time, the Higher Education Commission, in collaboration with the National Council of Industry, has established a subcommittee for promoting a public-private joint research between universities and industry. Their ultimate goal is to conduct research for promoting Thai

wisdom especially in terms of food production, which has been recognized as one of the country's strengths.

4.5 The System of Education Quality Assurance

Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) has been established with an aim at encouraging basic and higher education institutions to conduct their self-evaluation regularly prior to receiving the external evaluation by the Office's authorized evaluators. Both types of evaluation will ensure that higher education institutions are accountable to the government who remains the biggest subsidizer, students, community, and stakeholders and that they provide education of quality in response to the needs of those stakeholders through the administrative process that are efficient, cost-effective, and transparent.

4.6 The Consolidation between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of University Affairs

On July 7th, 2003 after the enforcement of Ministry of Education Act, the former Ministry of Education and the former Ministry of University Affairs were immediately consolidated under the new Ministry of Education. Accordingly, those higher education institutions under both ministries are automatically unified under the same policy making organization. The consolidation has paved the way for the unity in the development and implementation of policy concerning higher education. Former teacher colleges or Rajabhat Institutes and Rajamonkol Institutes of Technology have been transformed into universities and are ready to join other higher education institutions on the road towards autonomous universities. There is also a positive sign of cooperation among higher education institutions under the jurisdiction of former two ministries, especially in terms of the admission system which many of them will open more seats to local graduates within the extent of distance that each institution can offer.

4.7 University Autonomy

Realizing the significance and necessity of being autonomous universities, most of higher education institutions in Thailand have separately submitted their university autonomy bills to the cabinet. The government did not try to enforce but encouraged them to decide on voluntary basis. One important factor that accelerated the universities' faculty staff to submit their bills for being autonomous may stem from the fear that the consolidation with the Ministry of Education will pull them under control of the new ministry and deprive their academic

freedom Up till now six universities in Thailand have transformed into autonomous universities. Some have enjoyed their autonomy right from the beginning of the establishment while some have struggled for a few years. Although at the beginning there were doubts and resistance from faculty staff over the transformation into autonomous universities, at present it seems to be accepted by all concerned.

King Mongkut University of Technology, Thonburi (KMUTT) may be one of outstanding exemplary cases that proved to be a successful transformation. The university's decision on autonomy in early 1980's was said to be internally driven with a continuity in policy and administration and support from the Lecturers Council made up of opposition group in many universities. Realizing the impact of economic crises in 1970's, bureaucratic constraints, lack of flexibility on decisions on academic programs and subsidiary units and learning from the experience of inside and outside the country, KMUTT joined other 16 state universities in 1992 for simultaneous transition, but later decided to push ahead by itself. It established 7 working groups on autonomy preparation (planning and personnel administration, finance, budgets and procurement, administration, academic matters, personnel remuneration and benefits, students affairs, information services). In 1998 KMUTT became autonomous after the KMUTT Act was promulgated in that year. According to the past experience, KMUTT have found two major challenges. One is the personnel management system and the other is self-financing.

Finding out some anxieties of civil servants such as unclear benefits, uncertainties in salary increase and tenure, possibility of unfair evaluation and staff easily dismissed, KMUTT offered a dual personnel management system in which civil servants can stay on as civil servants as long as they wish or resign and be recruited into the new system as university contracted employees and new staff hired as contracted employees. Some measure was taken to give incentives of civil servants such as salary top up for those who joined the new system and additional budget for university provident fund and employees' benefits.

Suranaree University of Technology and Walailuck University which were established as autonomous universities from beginning have strong backing of politicians where universities are located and were founded when economy was buoyant. However, both of them have performed effectively. With more autonomy and flexibility when compared to other government controlled universities, both could express their optimum potential as domestic think tanks while enjoying high recognition from international academic community.

Thailand's two autonomous Buddhist universities found no constraints concerning the allocation of financial resources when a huge sum of donations came from big foundations of famous temples all over the country. At present, they have expanded more than 20 campuses by their self management. The internal evaluation of the university performance conducted by autonomous universities has shown satisfactory results. KMUTT have achieved to a certain extent the change in paradigm and work culture of its personnel. By cultivating the corporate attitude which emphasizes the organization's benefits before individual gain, sharing visions of the university, cost-effectiveness, goal and outputs-oriented working culture, monitoring and evaluation as constructive tools for improvement, and some expectation on quality and standards of work. In his retrospective analysis of the transition to an autonomous university, Dr. Krissanapong Kirtikara, President of KMUTT (Krissanapong 2003), pointed out many outcomes that he perceived as the achievement.

According to his report, a system of administration for the university to reach its vision with its stakeholders has been established. They could surmount psychological barrier of civil servants normally passive and subservient to problems. There was more confidence in potentials of personnel, quality and dynamics of the system. Good governance was in place. There was also demonstration of potential and innovativeness: cost reduction, sense of saving, higher productivity, awareness of quality and cost effectiveness, technical outputs increase, revenues and assets increase. Personnels accepted the mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation of individuals and organizations as tools for improvement. Furthermore, there was increase of income and assets based on technical capability. University could earn more incomes, not just be given. New working culture with stakeholders was established, and the recruitment was more open for outsiders.

4.8 Local Universities for Community Development

While most public universities will, as research universities, focus on conducting research of high quality so as to achieve the goal of being world class universities, forty one Rajabhat Institutes across the country which evolved from "Teacher's Colleges" are being restructured to function as higher education institutes for community development. These institutes will soon change to be a group of Rajabhat universities and work closely with community through problem-based research. Since community is the fundamental part of society, if Rajabhat universities develop local wisdom, eradicate such problems as poverty, drug, illiteracy, and so on their activities will lead to an integrated and

sustainable development. This is an innovative role of Thai Higher Education institutions – the universities for local communities development.

5. Government’s Policy to Accelerate Higher Education Reform

As for the support from governments, in the past six years, many students from low income families have benefited from the Education Loan Fund.

The Thailand Research Fund (TRF) is another organization that has played a very important role in promoting research conducting among University teaching personnel. By supporting research grants and honoring outstanding researchers, the fund has found the improvement of the research work of higher education institutions both quantitatively and qualitatively. Recently, many measures have been taken to accelerate higher education reform in Thailand.

For example, the government has provided an extraordinary budget for the development of teaching staff, which will continue for many years to come. The form of the development could be pursuing higher degrees abroad or attending courses necessary for strengthening their academic capability. Starting from the year 2004, the project is expected to assure the improvement of the quality of teaching personnel in higher education institutions all over the country.

In order to expand the opportunity and access to higher education for all, the government has established ten community colleges by transforming some non-formal education facilities centers and technical colleges into community colleges without unnecessary spending for the construction of buildings. Their low cost programs are believed to make them attractive to students of lower income families and open more access to higher education for students in rural areas. The community colleges offer training that responds flexibly to both the local needs and the community development. With the open system provided by the National Education Act, it is highly possible that the courses offered in community colleges can be linked with university programs through the transfer of credit system and equivalency provisions.

In addition to these, the government also provided scholarships for almost 1,000 bright but disadvantaged students each year by using the profit derived from selling the government’s lottery. The recipients will be selected from each designated area under the program called “one area one scholarship student”. The selected students will be supported from the first year of undergraduate level to a doctoral degree level. They may

choose to study at domestic universities or go abroad to any country of their choice.

Further, the Prime Minister, in his speech at the meeting of Universities' presidents, called for the eradication of barrier among departments urging them to share resources within and between institutions. His proposal was positively welcomed by all.

6. Conclusion

Though the issue of higher education reform in Thailand has been raised for many years, it was not until the promulgation of the National Education Act in 1999 that the comprehensive reform including that of higher education really took place. In implementing the reform of higher education, Thailand has placed high importance on the reform of learning and teaching for improving the quality of learners, which every higher education institution, both public and private, needs to comply with. To facilitate the learning reform, the autonomy of universities is necessary so that they can improve the efficiency of administration in order to respond effectively to the needs of learners and community.

Autonomous universities are still regarded as the government's organizations, receiving block grants from the government as usual, but are given autonomy for more flexible administration. There was a delay and a controversy over the advantages and disadvantages of being autonomous universities, especially in terms of personnel management, but the consolidation of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of University Affairs has accelerated the procedures.

Experiences of autonomous universities both in Thailand and other countries have proved that autonomy is an effective mean of higher education administration. However, three key issues need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, autonomy has to be linked with the learning reform for the improvement of learners' quality. Secondly, universities need to make a paradigm shift in the attitudes of teaching staff and their working culture. Thirdly, the transformation must be based on win-win situation of change from which everyone concerned can receive benefits. Last but not least, there must be a political support from the government and members of the parliament including public understanding and participation so that the reform of higher education would become successfully materialized.

Higher Education of Thailand has been in the process of reform in the way that it will have deep roots in Thai society, conducting research on the Thai wisdom for the development of surrounding

communities while pursuing excellence to meet international standards and enhance the country's competitiveness.

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