
Higher Education Reform in Thailand and Its Impacts on Thai Private Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Formal higher education in Thailand started in A.D. 1889 with the establishment of the first medical training school. Since then the country's higher education has been greatly expanded. At present there are 24 public universities / institutions and 51 private universities and colleges under the Ministry of University Affairs. In addition, the Ministry of Education has jurisdiction over some higher education institutions, notably, 41 Rajabhat Institutes, 33 campuses of Rajamangala Institute of Technology, and some special field colleges.

Several factors exerted influences that lead to higher education reform in Thailand, notably, the worldwide trend of higher education reform, the economic downturn in Thailand during the 1990's, and the promulgation of the 1999 National Education Act. In essence, higher education reform in Thailand comprised the following : (1) reform of the administrative system in which all higher education institutions are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education; (2) reform of the budgeting system ; (3) improvement of the internal administrative system of each institution ; (4) change of the screening system for entry to higher education ; (5) quality assurance and accreditation of higher education institutions ; and (6) more participation of the private sector in higher education.

Impacts of higher education reform on Thai private higher education institutions include the following : (1) proliferation of private higher education institutions ; (2) private higher education institutions being in a better position to compete with their public counterpart ; and (3) more intense competition among higher education institutions, both public and private.

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of Education in Pitsanuloke, Mahasarakham and Songkla. These three provincial campuses carried the name of the College of Education and offered bachelor's degree programs as well as graduate programs in the field of education.

Establishment of full-fledged regional universities in the provinces started with the founding of Chiang Mai University in 1960 for the Northern Region, Khon Kaen University in 1962 for the Northeastern Region, and Prince of Songkhla University in 1966 for the Southern Region. Special attention was focused on promoting engineering, agriculture, medicine and the natural sciences as the priority areas for study in line with the accelerated economic and social development throughout the country.

Apart from the establishment of regional universities, two more institutions of higher learning were founded in Bangkok. The National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) was established as a graduate institution specializing in public administration for national development. The Asian Institute of Technology opened in 1967 as an autonomous international institution offering graduate programs in physical science and engineering to students from all over Asia.

Other universities and institutions of higher learning were formed through the upgrading or amalgamation of existing schools and colleges. In 1971, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology was established through the amalgamation of several technical schools. It

has since developed into three institutions, namely the Institute of Technology, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Thon-buri (KMUTT) and the Institute of Technology Srinakharinwirot (ITSNW). In 1974, the College of Engineering was elevated to university status and became the Institute of Technology of Srinakharinwirot University. It has three provinces, Bangkok, Mahasarakham, and Nakhon Phanom, but remained the same as the other two campuses. In 1980, the Institute of Technology Chiang Mai was established and renamed the Institute of Technology.

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has since developed into three independent institutions, namely, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, North Bangkok (KMITNB) ; King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Thon-buri (KMUTT) ; and King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Ladkrabang (KMUTL). In 1974, the College of Education was elevated to university status and bestowed the name of Srinakharinwirot University. Automatically, its three provincial campuses at Pitsanulake, Mahasarakham, and Songkhla were also elevated but remained to be the university's provincial campuses. In 1975, an agricultural college in Chiang Mai was upgraded to university status and renamed Maejo Institute of Agricultural Technology.

The decade of 1990's saw further expansion of public universities and institutions of higher learning in Thailand. In 1990, Suranaree University of Technology was established in Nakorn Ratchasima, a Northeastern province. In the same year, Ubon Ratchathani University was founded in Ubon Ratchathani, another Northeastern province. In 1992, Walailak University was founded in the Southern province of Nakorn Si Thammarat. Also during this time, the three provincial campuses of Srinakharinwirot University were elevated to become full-fledged universities. The Pitsanuloke campus became Naresuan University ; the Mahasarakham Campus became Mahasarakham University ; and the Songkhla campus became Thaksin University. The most recent university of Thailand, Mae Fah Luang University was founded in 1997 in the Northern province of

Chiang Rai.

Open Universities

In order to alleviate the public pressure for more access to university level education and to provide greater opportunity for higher education, the Thai Government established two open universities : Ramkhamhaeng University in 1971, and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) in 1979. The common feature of these two universities is their unlimited, or open, admission of students. However, these two universities differ in their modes of delivery of instruction. While Ramkhamhaeng University uses the dual system of instruction, that is, both the on campus and off-campus learning ; STOU uses solely the long distance mode of instruction.

Higher Education Institutions under the Ministry of Education

The administration of higher education institutions in Thailand was unique in the past on one aspect, that is, degree granting higher education institutions were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of University Affairs while non-degree granting higher education institutions were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Thus, teachers colleges, public and private vocational colleges, colleges of physical education, colleges of dramatic arts, and colleges of fine arts were under the Ministry of Education and offered programs leading to the diploma level.

Starting in 1957, teachers colleges were allowed to offer a four-year program leading

to the bachelor's degree in education. Then in 1984 they were allowed to diversify their curricula to fields other than education and were bestowed the name of Rajabhat Institute. At present, the 41 Rajabhat Institutes offer undergraduate programs, and some graduate programs, in three broad areas : education, science, and humanities and social science.

Since 1981, some vocational colleges under the Ministry of Education has been bestowed the name of Rajamangala Institute of Technology (RIT) and allowed to offer degree programs in vocational and technical fields. At present, RIT comprises 14 campuses in Bangkok and 19 campuses in the provinces.

Private Higher Education Institutions

The private sector has always played significant roles in all levels of education in Thailand. There were numerous private kinder-garten schools, private elementary schools, private secondary schools, and private vocational schools. In the past, private vocational schools were under the Ministry of Education and were allowed to offer programs leading to the diploma level only. With the promulgation of the Private Colleges Act in 1969, the private sector has been allowed to set up colleges that can offer degree programs and be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of University Affairs. Subsequent years witnessed the proliferation of private colleges throughout the country. Then in 1979, the Private Higher Education Institutions Act was promulgated allowing the Ministry of University Affairs

the power to grant university status to private colleges. Among the first groups of private colleges to be granted university status were Bangkok University (1984), Payab University (1984), Dhurakijpundit University (1984), the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (1984), Siam University (1986), and Sripatum University (1987).

During the decade of 1990's the number of private universities and colleges increased dramatically. Many colleges were granted university status, while some new colleges and universities were established. In addition, some foreign universities set up their campuses in Thailand and some new private universities have strong overseas connections.

Present Conditions of Thai Higher Education Institutions

The latest statistics shows that there are 24 public universities/institutions under the Ministry of University Affairs. Out of this total number, 12 are located in Bangkok while the other 12 are located in the provinces. Two universities, Ramkhamhaeng and STOU, are of the open or unlimited admission type ; while the rest are traditional limited admission institutions. Total enrollment of the 24 public institutions is 836,880, with 565,032 or 67.52% of the total enrollment being that of the two open universities. (Ministry of University Affairs, 2000)

On the other hand, there are 51 private universities and colleges in the country. Of

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this total number, 22 are universities and 29 are colleges. The total number of 199,629 students enrolls in these private institutions in the 2000 academic year. (Ministry of University Affairs, 2000)

As for higher education institutions under the Ministry of Education, at present there are 41 Rajabhat Institutes scattered throughout the country with total enrollment of 212,044 regular students and 287,351 associate program students. Also, the 33 campuses of RIT enroll 20,557 degree program students. Moreover, other degree granting institutions under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education include 10 colleges of physical education, 12 dramatic arts colleges, and two fine arts colleges. The total enrollment of students under degree programs of these institutions is rather small, numbering less than 3,000 students.

Factors Leading to Higher Education Reform in Thailand

Three main factors exert influences leading to higher education reform in Thailand, namely, the worldwide trend of higher education reform, the economic downturn in Thailand, and the promulgation of the 1999 National Education Act. They are described in more details as follows :

The Worldwide Trend of Higher Education Reform

Before the turn of the century, several developments occurred that contributed to the worldwide trend of higher education reform.

These developments are the following :

1. The Great Increase of Higher Education Enrollment. It has become clearer and clearer that higher education has become education for the mass, not just for the elite as in the past. During the last three decades the number of students in higher education institutions throughout the world had increased dramatically. In 1960, the worldwide higher education enrollment was 13 millions. In 1970, the figure increased to 28 millions ; in 1980 the figure increased further to 51 millions ; and in 1995 the figure reached 82 millions. Thus, within the span of 35 years the enrollment figures had increased by sixfold. (UNESCO, 1998)

This great increase in higher education enrollment resulted from the worldwide population growth and the felt need on greater numbers of youths to receive college education. Consequently, higher education needed to be reformed in order to provide quality education to much greater numbers of students.

2. Worldwide Economic Growth and the Requirement for Quality Human Resource. The advancement in science and technology resulted in worldwide rapid economic growth which, in turn, called for quality human resource to spur and sustain such growth. Consequently, higher education needed to be reformed in order to turn out quality human resource to effectively support and sustain economic growth.

3. Globalization. Globalization that resulted from great advancement of information technology enabled countries throughout the

world to compare their higher education systems with those of other countries. Comparison as well as cooperation among nations enabled each country to realize the need for reform of its higher education.

4. Information Technology. Great advancement in information technology enabled higher education institutions to reform their instructional as well as administrative systems.

5. Financial Constraints. The great increases of higher education enrollment put great burden on the government to provide adequate financial supports to higher education. Consequently, higher education needed to be reformed in order to function effectively and efficiently within the context of financial constraints.

6. The Reform of Economic Systems. During the two decades of 1980's and 1990's, many communist countries had changed their economic systems from the ones that were based on centrally planned economy to the ones that were based on the market forces. Consequently, higher education institutions in those countries needed to be reformed in order to produce graduates who can work and live effectively in the market economy.

Realizing the needs for worldwide higher education reform, UNESCO conducted five world conferences on higher education for the twenty-first century from 1996-1998. Out of these conferences came the World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century. This world declaration sets the trend

for worldwide higher education reform on the following topics : missions, management, access, quality, relevance, financing and funding, and internationalization. (UNESCO, 1998).

The Economic Downturn in Thailand During the 1990's

During the early years of the 1990's Thai economy was growing strongly with the averaged double-digit growth rate. There were talks of Thailand becoming the fifth tiger of Asia, after Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Then in 1996, the economic crisis started with the collapse of financial institutions. The ensuing economic downturn was so severe that the Thai Government needed to seek help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Economic stagnation continued into the new century. At present Thailand has still not fully recovered from the economic crisis.

The impacts upon Thailand's public higher education institutions are mostly financial but they have extensive repercussions. With annual budgets being cut, new staff positions being frozen, and new developmental projects being stalled, most universities find it hard to maintain their former level of effectiveness. They need to seek reform in order to survive. (Pornchulee Achava-Amrung, 2001)

The impacts upon Thailand's private higher education institutions are similar to those upon their public counterpart. Financial constraints result in decrease in enrollment, higher dropout rates, and graduates having difficulties in finding jobs. Yet there is at least

one positive consequence among private higher education institutions. The economic crisis cause many private higher education institutions to make it easier for teaching staff to find jobs in the private sector.

The Proposed Education Act

The 1990's Education Act has been drafted and is currently under the requirement of the National Education Commission. The Act stipulating that the National Education Commission will have the direction of reform in the field of higher education, including high quality assurance components of administration, and investment quality assurance.

Essence of the Reform in Thailand

Higher education reform will take a long time to implement in that year. The reform which will be the following

1. Reform of the Education System. The results of the reform system :

one positive consequence. Higher unemployment rates among professionals due to economic crisis cause many of them to seek jobs as instructors in private higher education institutions making it easier for them to find qualified teaching staff members.

The Promulgation of the 1999 National Education Act.

The 1999 National Education Act has been drafted and promulgated in accord with the requirement of section 81 of the Constitution stipulating that "...there shall be a national education law..." (National Constitution of Thailand, B.E. 2540). In essence, the 1999 National Education Act lays down the scope and direction of reform for all levels of education including higher education. It touches on all components of higher education including administration, instruction, personnel, resource and investment, educational standards and quality assurance, and technologies for education.

Essence of Higher Education Reform in Thailand

Higher education reform in Thailand will take effect in 2002 with the full implementation of the National Education Act in that year. Aspects of the reform, some of which will be gradually implemented, include the following :

1. Reform of the Administrative System. The following changes will occur as results of the reform of the administrative system :

1.1 All levels of education will be under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Religion, and Culture that will be established in place of the former two separate ministries : the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of University Affairs. Thus starting in 2002 all higher education institutions will be under the same ministry.

1.2 All public universities and higher education institutions will no longer be civil service organizations under the traditional bureaucratic system. Instead, they will be encouraged to transformed into self-autonomous institutions under the supervision of the government.

1.3 There will be three levels of higher education institutions : research oriented universities/institutions, instruction oriented university/institutions, and community colleges/institutions.

2. Reform of the Budgeting System. The following changes will occur as results of the reform of the budgeting system :

2.1 Financial provision from the government to each higher education institution will be in the form of block grants instead of line items. This will give each institution greater freedom to utilize and allocate the budget as it considers appropriate.

2.2 Provision of financial supports for needy students in both the public and private institutions.

2.3 Implementation of the cost-sharing between learners and higher education

institutions.

3. Improvement of the Internal Administrative System of Each Institution. In the past, the internal administrative system of each higher education institution tended to be highly centralized with vast power being vested on the president. As a result, decision-makings were top-down leaving each internal unit with little or no decision making power. Upon full implementation of the 1999 National Education Act in 2002, the internal administrative system of each institution will become more decentralized allowing each internal unit more power for decision-making. Also, the appointment process of top administrators in higher education institution will be reviewed and reformed.

4. Change of the Screening System for Entry to Higher Education. In the past, the entrance examination administered by the Central Committee was the sole method used to determine which student would be admitted to which university. Now, the allocation of quota together with the grade point average (GPA) from the secondary schools are additional factors for consideration. It is expected that in the future less emphasis will be put on the entrance examination scores while the GPA and other considerations will be given more weight.

5. Quality Assurance and Accreditation of higher Education Institutions. In order to ensure that Thai higher education institutions continuously maintain and improve their quality,

the internal and external quality assurance systems will be implemented. For internal quality assurance, each institution is encouraged to conduct self-studies and publish self-study reports the information of which can be used in consideration for further improvement of the institution. Also, each institution is encouraged to implement internal quality assurance program and apply for certification of International Standard for Organization (ISO). For external quality assurance, an independent quality auditing organization will be established. Its function is to visit and conduct quality assessment of each higher education institution. An institution that passes the external quality assessment will be awarded the certificate of accreditation.

6. More Participation of the Private Sector in Higher Education. To make higher education more relevant to the needs for social and economic development of the country, the Thai Government encourages more participation of the private sector in higher education. It is envisaged that the following changes will take place :

6.1 The private sector will have more roles in the determination of the type, scope, and content of the various degree programs.

6.2 The private sector will be encouraged to establish training institutions/ centers in specialized areas to train manpower to meet its specific need.

6.3 Establishment of a linkage between the higher education institutions and

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6.4 More higher education institutions will be established by the private sector to meet the needs for higher education of increasingly large numbers of secondary school graduates in the future.

Impacts of Higher Education Reform on Thai Private Higher Education Institutions.

It is expected that higher education reform in Thailand will have strong impacts on Thai private higher education institutions. Changes that are expected to occur include the following :

1. Proliferation of private higher education institutions. The large increase in the number of secondary school graduates as a result of the full implementation of the 1999 National Education Act and the government's policy of encouraging the private sector to

participate more in higher education will result in the great increase of private higher education institutions. Moreover, globalization will further result in more overseas universities/institutions setting up their campuses or their distance learning centers in Thailand.

2. Private higher education institutions in Thailand will be able to attract more top-notch instructors and thus enabling them to offer more varied and better quality academic programs.

3. Private higher education institutions in Thailand will be in a better position to compete with public higher education institutions due to the fact that the cost of attending public higher education institutions will become much higher and be on par with that of private high education institutions.

4. Competition between public and private institutions and among private institutions themselves will become more intense. In the long run, survival of any program or even any institution will depend largely on its quality. □

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