

Strategies for Higher Education Reform in Thailand: A Historical Analysis

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The history of higher education reform in Thailand can be divided into 4 phases: 1. reform for professionals, 2. reform for liberalism, 3. reform for massification, and 4. reform for new management.

The first-stage reform that occurred during 1943-1958 was rather the development and the need. When Chulalongkorn University was founded in 1916, it was a multidisciplinary university. But from 1932, Thammasat University was established to enhance the knowledge and the understanding of laws and politics, and in 1943, there were the simultaneous establishments of 3 universities in specific professions namely University of Medicine, University of Agriculture and University of Fine Arts. University of Medicine was established in the Ministry of Public Health, and the Minister of Public Health was the Chairman of the University Administrative Board. In the agriculture profession, the Forestry School of the Royal Forestry Department was developed into Kasetsart (Agriculture) University to provide education, to do research and to enhance the agriculture courses and other related courses, with the Minister of Agriculture as the Chairman of the University Board. In the same way, School of Fine Arts was upgraded and accredited as University of Fine Arts.

The second-stage reform can be regarded as a more valid reform because it had the targets, the process and the periodical follow-up. It occurred after World War II and was influenced by the higher education concept in the United States that supported and encouraged higher education institutions to have the broad objectives which include both research and academic services, to have more liberal arts curriculums, to have the learning teaching system with more emphasis on individuals such as the credit system and the management with share authority that mostly took place during 1959-1972.

The third-stage reform with the predominant stress on technology came from the social problem that the provincial people still had little opportunity to study at the higher education level. The government encourage private sectors to take responsibility on higher education and plan to open new government universities. But the opening of a new university or a new campus

is not an easy task. Consequently, during 1992-1996 the Government had the policy to encourage all universities, especially the urban universities to expand their IT campuses extensively all over the country. Even open universities like Sukhothai Thammathiraj University and Ramkhamhaeng University also developed the long-distance learning and the internal administration of the institutions immensely developed their technology simultaneously.

The present reform is the reform that aims at the debureaucratization of a university so that it will become an independent corporation administered by its own Board of Trustees and can be operated partially by means of privatization. And this is considered as a very significant reform in Thai higher education.

These four phases of reform share many common techniques, methods, and strategies as follows.

1. These reforms are undertaken in accordance with changes of the society. Therefore, leaders of the reform should be able to analyze the direction of social changes in order to determine the direction of higher education reform.

2. Reform concepts tend to be greatly influenced by foreign countries. Therefore, leaders need to study their concepts, implementation, and adopt them to a certain extent.

3. Each reform is typically guided by a group of intellectual leaders. Therefore, leaders of the reform must have their own ideas and form alliance with these intellectual leaders.

4. Each reform needs social support. Therefore, leaders of the reform should publicize or “sell” their ideas to the society.

5. Each reform must have steps of implementation. Therefore, leaders have to visualize, understand, and follow these steps.

6. Reform takes time, particularly in the Thai society, which tends to resist sudden changes. Therefore, leaders need to have a slow but accurate plan.

7. Reform must gain approval and support from high ranking leaders, therefore leaders of the reform have to communicate, gain access, and gain acceptance from the head of the government. Politics is an important part of the reform.

8. Reform has to be followed up on an on-going basis in order to ensure an effective implementation.