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Cultural and Historical Factors and their Influence on the Development of Higher Education in Thailand

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Abstract

Higher education is similar in some ways to democracy. You can have the Westminster system or the Presidential system, or a mixture of both. Just as no two democracies are the same, so too higher education systems must take into account historical and cultural factors that make them unique. With democracy there are numerous models and one's view of what is implied by democracy is largely based on one's own experience of that system of government. In a number of countries there exists a façade of democracy, as does the European or American model of higher education. A closer examination beneath the surface suggests that the HE systems of many countries have their own unique flavor, based on strong cultural or historical influences.

This paper takes a critical look at the case of Thailand to illustrate how HE has evolved in that country, what has been adopted or discarded from the West, and what makes it unique.

Success at the global level is often measured in terms of excellence, which is in turn linked to research/publication, as well as graduate employment (e.g., Fortune 500 companies). However, such evaluation does not appear to take into account the role of the individual institution, whose focus may be solely on satisfying its own unique market as well as place in society.

In the end the HE institution must be driven by the role it has been given in society and must adapt to the prevailing economic realities. Various models that have been well documented are simply an end towards this means. Ultimately, the HE institution cannot afford to become an island. Neither can any form of democratic government.

Introduction

The case of Thailand is somewhat unique in Asia since there was no lengthy period of colonization and thus education was not heavily influenced by European or American models. In fact, Thailand had to find her own way. This was not done in isolation, however, it was undertaken without the confidence of having an imposed or inherited system.

Thus the “Western Dominance” hypothesis applies less in Thailand than it would in formerly colonized nations, since Thailand has had the luxury of being selective in what is adopted and is also very mindful of retaining cultural and social values. This would place Thailand somewhere between Malaysia and China with respect to the “Asian Values” hypothesis [1].

Regarding the “Economic Determinism” hypothesis, Thailand can only plead guilty on all counts. Education for the benefit of national development has always been the driving force. The economic progress of neighbors such as Korea and Taiwan has always been viewed by Thailand as being linked to investment in research and in education. Sadly, this linkage between education and economic development is not translated in budget allocation or investment.

For the “Globalist Inclusion” hypothesis, Thailand does not regard itself as being part of any global race. Some consideration is currently being given to the position of Thai universities in the future ASEAN community, so it is perhaps more ‘regional inclusion’. Global rankings are given greater weight in terms of internal competitiveness. The HE response to globalization is to produce Thai graduates who can be global citizens.

Background

Early education in Thailand was provided predominantly by Buddhist temples and missionaries. To a far lesser extent, this continues to this day, in addition to Islamic teaching.

King Mongkut (Rama IV), who reigned from 1851-1868, urged members of his court to seek a European style of education. There were a number of missionary schools in Siam at that time, mostly American. King Mongkut is known as the father of science and technology in Thailand, mainly due to his interest in astronomy [2].

King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) reigned from 1868-1910 and in order to consolidate Thailand's independence and modernize the country, introduced major reforms to the government bureaucracy, which included centers for higher education incorporating elements of western influence. The opening of the first medical school, Siriraj Hospital in 1889, marked the beginning of higher education in Thailand. [3].

King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) reigned from 1910-1925 and is credited with establishing the Royal Pages School, which eventually became Vajiravudh College. Interestingly, King Vajiravudh is also credited with the belief that the country's prosperity could only be maintained if the people had adequate knowledge. Thus we can trace the economic determinism hypothesis to an early beginning. Vajiravudh College was also modeled on the British boarding school, the King himself having studied at Sandhurst and Oxford [4].

It should be noted that, in establishing Chulalongkorn University in 1917, King Vajiravudh maintained a distinctively Thai architectural style, is said to have influenced the style of graduation gown and ensured that many of the courses taught were Thai in nature [5].

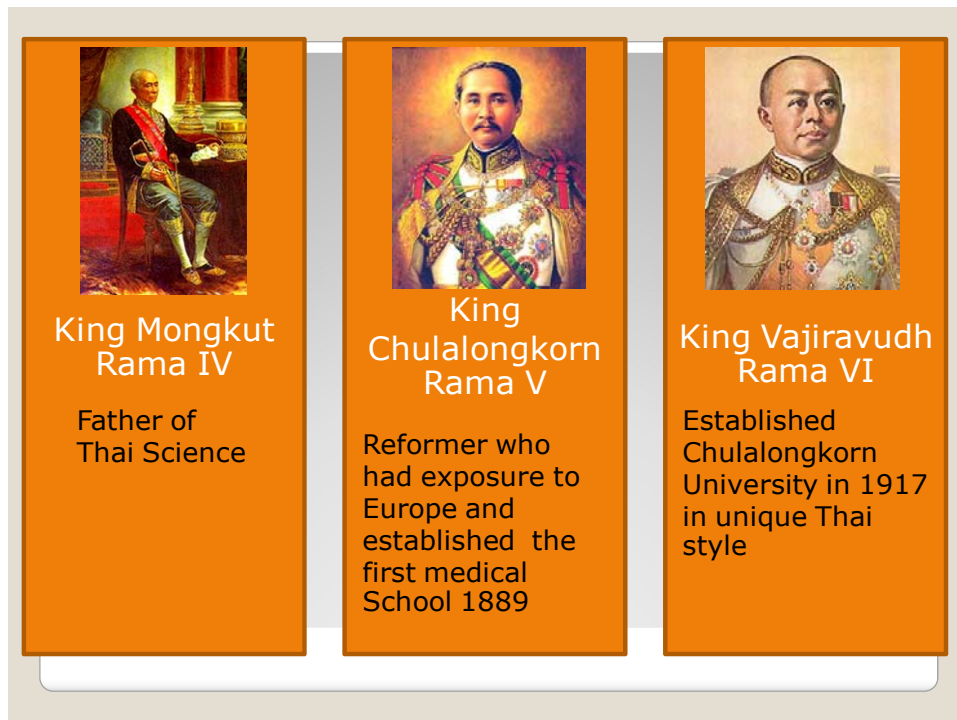


Figure 1. Early influence of Siamese rulers on the beginnings of education.

Following the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932, the following year the University of Moral and Political Science was established. This was later to become Thammasat University.

In 1943, three more universities were established: the University of Medical Sciences (Mahidol University), the Agricultural University (Kasetsart University) and the Fine Arts University (Silpakorn University). The focus of these and the already established institutions was to produce competent personnel in specialized disciplines for government service and administration [3].

It was not until 1964 that higher education became decentralized. Also in 1967, the Asian Institute of Technology was established as an autonomous international graduate school, offering sciences and engineering to students from all over Asia, as well as from Thailand [3]. A large number of engineering lecturers in Thai universities from the 1980's until the present time were graduates of AIT.

Certainly there has been both European and American influence on education in Thailand. Nonetheless, there have also been clear and successful attempts to maintain a Thai character to the education system, possibly due in part to the primary purpose of training the Thai civil service, the Pages School being the earliest example of this. The revered status of teachers that still prevails to this day and the unique Thai cultural nuances all can be traced from these early beginnings.

The Modern Period

It is apparent that there are a distinct number of milestones for HE in Thailand, many of which were the subject of external influences. While there have been two periods of proliferation in the number of HE institutes, it is the underlying causes that are of interest, as change and legislation are mostly reactions to these.

One obvious but more subtle change was the growth of the middle class in Thailand, meaning that more students could afford access to HE. This was bolstered by the government also making available student loans. Coupled with this was a change to 12 years of free basic education in 1999, thus bridging the previously existing gap for entry into HE [6]. While this has created an overload in the entry level age group (currently estimated at meeting 80% of needs) [6], this is predicted to change in the future as Thailand has to deal with an aging population. Already it is foreseen that HE providers will in the future need to adjust to accommodate more of the working population as the school student population declines [7].

Also subtle were the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society and the HE response to this. A great opportunity was missed in transforming HE to meet industrial needs [6].

Medicine and engineering found favor with parents wanting their children to have an assured future. Less emphasis was placed on training civil servants as a result. This was followed, and continues to be followed, by a change from a labor-based to a skills-based industry, not always successfully. The current phase could be described as meeting the needs caused by globalization and developing a knowledge-based society. Pressure is applied from some quarters to make Thai HE competitive in the global marketplace, or at least as a regional education ‘hub’, a popular catch phrase at the moment [8]. While internationalization is inevitable, this should be pursued while maintaining a balance of both local and global knowledge [6].

Concurrent with these transitions has been the increasing use of English as the teaching medium. Since the official language of ASEAN is also English, this is likely to see greater emphasis in the near future. Other languages, such as Chinese and Japanese, have not been totally ignored [9].

A further development of significance was what might be termed the “MBA revolution”. Commencing in the early 90’s this seemed to follow a trend in the United States. This was witnessed in Thailand firstly by a demand for undergraduate courses in accounting, finance, business studies and management, being the entry point for employment in the many new companies proliferating at the time and also being advantageous for entry into the civil service. This ‘revolution’ was timed with the concept that HE was a saleable commodity and thus spawned a large number of private HE providers, a few of questionable quality [10].

It has reached the point today where an undergraduate degree in these fields is regarded as no longer adequate for advancement and the MBA is viewed as the perfect solution with its inherent flexibility to be added to almost any undergraduate degree. This has more recently been supported by government intervention setting minimum salaries for bachelor and master degree holders.

Possibly the strongest influence on HE in Thailand was the “ICT revolution”, which also changed the way of teaching. With the age of the computer came demand for IT and computer studies at the HE level. Universities had to quickly adapt because this was also viewed as a very lucrative market. This led to evening and weekend classes to meet the demand and this in turn caused HE providers to pause and consider their methods of delivery. Libraries became study centers and meeting places. Anyone with a computer had access to knowledge, so teaching methods had to be completely revamped. Distance education and life-long learning suddenly became within our grasp. In adjusting to this new age, little of the Thai character in education was lost, in fact it was enhanced as students built their own forums and study groups.

Reform

The most significant reform ever in the history of HE in Thailand took place with the National Education Act of 1999 and subsequent acts under this legislation [11, 12].

Major features of this reform include the division of HE into four major groups, each with clear responsibilities:

- Research and postgraduate universities
- Specialized institutions, including science and technology and comprehensive universities
- Four-year universities and liberal arts colleges
- Community colleges [13].

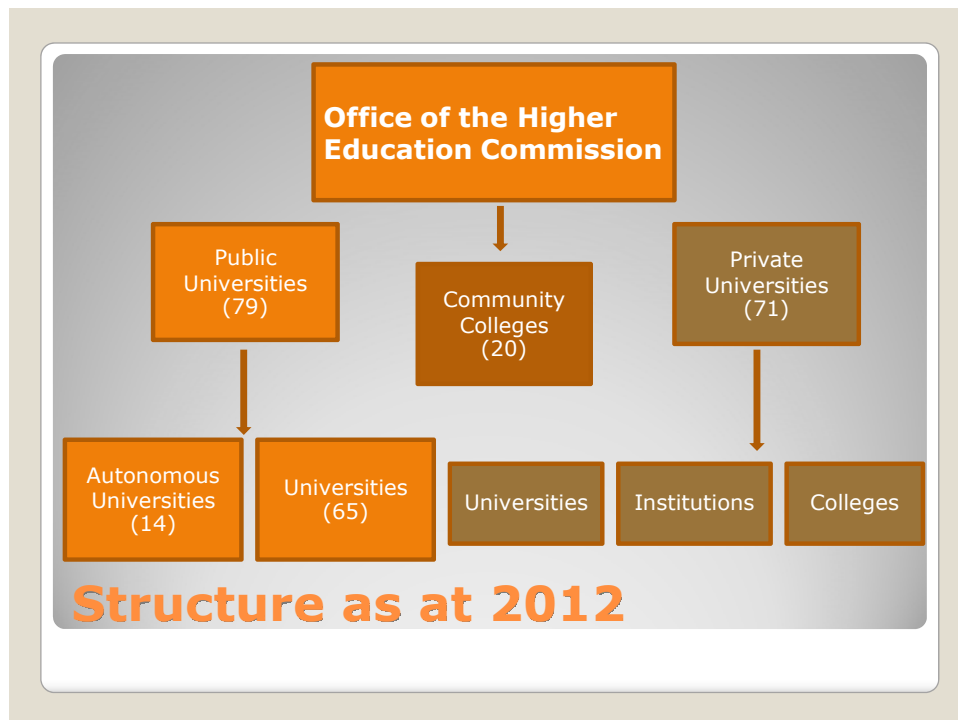


Figure 2. Structure following reform under the Ministry of Education.

One of the key features was the granting of autonomy in administration to universities. Currently there are 13 institutes who have opted for autonomy and this has had a profound effect on university management and administration [14, 15]. Some scholars have suggested that this is simply an act of smoke and mirrors on the part of governments to reduce spending [16]. However, in the case of Thailand, much of the transition has been voluntary and in a number of cases met with enthusiasm.

Research and Community Activities

While a small handful of universities have exemplary records in cultivating relationships with the industrial sector by directing their research efforts towards solving industrial problems, it is only recently dawning on the majority of HE providers that the private sector can represent a source of funding for research and associated training [17, 18]. This is clearly a phase of research in Thailand where industry has little or no research capability, so collaboration with research institutes is desirable to fill the gap [19]. What is mostly misunderstood by universities is that building a relationship of trust is a long process and there should not be an expectation of a new source of income overnight.

The benefit of autonomy is that universities can now actively pursue these relationships and restructure their organizations to cater for pure research streams, giving long overdue recognition to career development in this area [20].

As a result of this redefining of roles, HE institutes are now working with surrounding communities, remote communities, rural schools, in forests and in marine parks, ensuring that universities are not regarded as ivory towers.

These projects are not to study these communities but to join with them in making technology relevant and to help them apply and share their own indigenous knowledge. At the same time it helps lecturers and students to realize that their knowledge can be of direct benefit to the people.

This may not be uniquely Thai and not every university may be active to the same degree. However, it does demonstrate a locally developed and applied model, free from any European or American influence. There is no income generation from these activities as they are undertaken out of a sense of responsibility and care. At this level at least universities are very much involved in development as well as preservation and application of indigenous Thai wisdom.

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