

An Education/Industry Partnership at International Level : the Thai-French Innovation Centre

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It is indeed a great privilege and honour on my part to be with you today to share some experience of an education and industry partnership at international level in the form of the Thai-French Innovation Centre. But let me tell you something about my country first.

Thailand covers an area of about 514,000 km², with over 56 million inhabitants. Since 1932, when a revolution saw the end of absolute monarchy, Thailand has been governed by a constitutional monarch who exercises sovereignty through a parliament, a cabinet and the courts. The present monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who is King Mongkut's great grandson, has been on the throne since 1946. He is widely regarded as the most beloved Thai ruler since King Chulalongkorn, his grandfather. On July 2, 1988 he became Thailand's longest reigning monarch, overtaking his grandfather. The King's authority lies not with the constitution, but with the respect in which he is held by the Thai people. He has tapped a well of affection over many years by travelling tirelessly around the country supporting irrigation projects and similar schemes. The affection has, in large part, been inspired by his involvement with his subjects, a concern evidenced by the multitude of projects he has initiated on their behalf. Therefore it was not a surprise that he stopped the crisis in May singlehanded.

In the past few decades Thailand has experienced a rapid and sustained economic growth rate. The rates for 1988 and 1989 were over 10%. Due to the world situation, those for 1990 and 1991 were less than expected. In the early months of 1992, the Thai economy, by and large, fared reasonably well until it was given a big jolt by the political mayhem in May. However, at the time of writing, the damage to our overall economy, though severe, is widely judged to be temporary and not beyond repair.

For the past two decades Thailand has also accelerated its industrialization programme which has resulted in the birth and development of several important major industries, but not without some bottlenecks in infrastructure, especially in human resources development.

King Mongkut's Institute of Technology North Bangkok (KMITNB), one of twenty one public universities, plays a very important role in helping to solve this problem.

KMITNB's humble beginning dated back to 1959 as the Thai-German Technical School with merely two teachers and 50 students on an 8,000 square metre lot. The School became an Institute in 1964. Then in 1971, the Institute combined with the Thonburi Technical Institute and the Nontaburi Institute of Telecommunications to become a full-fledged university known as the King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, and the three afore-mentioned Technical Institutes became campuses of KMIT. Finally, in 1986, the three campuses became three independent universities, with the North Bangkok campus becoming KMITNB.

Today, KMITNB has a teaching and administrative staff of about 1,000. For academic year 1992/93 there are more than 8,400 students studying in five faculties. It offers forty four curricula in five levels, i.e. skilled worker, technician, bachelor, master and doctoral degrees. It has produced about 1,700 graduates for academic year 1991/92. All of whom are either employed or are self-employed.

KMITNB has continuously provided qualified technical teachers, administrators, scientists and professional technical manpower for the country's industrial infrastructure.

For the future, KMITNB will continue to be a major force in Thailand's technical human resources development. It will do so by continually striving for relevance and excellence. One activity to realize this aim is conducting a strong cooperation with public and private sectors both within the country and abroad. KMITNB therefore cooperate with the French government and industries to establish an Innovation Centre.

The sheer size, scope, involvement and commitment shown by the partners in the establishment of the Centre marks another milestone in strengthening the Thai-French alliance in development. The alliance follows a long relationship starting over three hundreds ago during Ayudhya period with diplomatic exchanges between King Narai and Louis XIV. Despite many threatening obstacles in the past, this alliance has been continually nurtured and preserved by both sides for a long time. And as days pass by, it continued to blossom

benefitting the peoples of both countries.

The fruits of the alliance are visible in the areas of direct investments, trading and development cooperation. In commerce, our alliance has resulted in the influx of 250 French companies. The global investments between 1960 and 1991 are approximately 500 MF. Besides the usually intractable benefits of technology transfer, such investments would have created both direct and indirect employment opportunities for several thousand people. Over the years, trading exchange between the two countries have likewise ballooned. Trade volume increased to 8268 MF. in 1991. Both sides continue looking forward into an optimistic future in commerce and trade. The alliance has also been active in scientific and technological education and training programmes which consist of about 40 main ones covering various areas.

To give you a living witness on how the alliance functions in small ways, allow me to touch on a subject very close to my heart. That is within the realm of human resources development. Believing that the usually complex technology transfer and joint venture processes involve both humanwares and hardwares, both partners agreed to create a technological centre of excellence in Thailand. That agreement yielded what has now become known as the Thai-French Innovation Centre.

The concept of the Centre was conceived in November 1989 when Madam Helene Farny had a meeting with our group. From that discussion, the idea of establishing a Centre was born and a commercial contract for the creation of the Centre was signed in October 1991. The objective of the Centre stated in the contract is to introduce new French technologies to Thailand by setting up a platform enabling industrialists, technicians, engineers, students and teachers in public and private schools and universities in Thailand to familiarize themselves with these technologies and to evaluate their worth in their attempts to improve productivity and quality.

Madam Farny put it in another way that the first task of the Thai-French Innovation Centre will be to provide formal and advanced training for engineering, technical students and alumni of King Mongkut's Institute of Technology North Bangkok and teachers from both public and private sectors. Its second challenge will consist of making available showrooms, consulting services and technical training facilities to Thai companies and to distributors of French companies involved in the Centre. A third facet of the Centre's activities will be the

joint creation of new products, in other words to innovate.

For equipment, the French party provides necessary equipment in welding; production automation; computer simulation in energy, and aeronautics; electronics and data processing. KMITNB has constructed an eight-storey building with furniture and necessary equipment and infrastructure, and the Centre was officially opened on 5th June 1992 by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

The French party has provided training for 60 teachers in France. It also provides complementary training in Thailand.

The development and running of the Centre are ensured by two Committees including Thai and French representatives. The first one is the Steering Committee which is a strategic and planning committee, with the following aims:

- to examine the development of the Centre by the addition of new subjects and syllabuses corresponding to the needs of Thai industry
- to select from among proposals received from French firms or organization, those likely to suit extension of the Centre
- to determine the budgets needed to set up these extensions
- to draw up a programme for promoting the French equipment and technologies installed in the Centre
- to programme cycles of meetings (conferences, exhibitions, symposiums, etc...)
- to draw up the rules for the Centre.

The second one is the Implementing Committee which is an administration and management committee, with the following aims:

- to ensure satisfactory operation of the Centre within the KMITNB
- to deal with applications from Thai firms, schools or universities for training courses and requests for demonstrations of studies prior to the investment
- to study conditions of access to the Centre for training courses requested by French firms, either for their Thai customers or for those from countries in the zone
- to monitor the preparation of events decided on by the Strategic and Planning Committee

- to define actions for promoting the Centre to Thai industry, other public or private universities, the Thai government or the press.

The Centre is run mainly by teachers from the Faculty of Technical Education and by some specialized teachers from other faculties during the next three years. Several new staff will be recruited.

In the future the Centre will be placed under the President's Office with the Board consisting of the management or representative of faculties concerned, with autonomous status. This will ensure that it will be run in a more flexible, efficient and effective way.

The knowledge and experience we hope to gain from the Centre are particularly relevant for all of us here today. I believe that this collaboration will trigger many small and seemingly innocent contacts between Thai and French companies. And a few will definitely blossom into long lasting, mutually beneficial and forward looking economic alliances. Let me close with a challenge to all of you, the forthcoming 21'st century is full of exciting opportunities but not without obstacles. Let us use all the know-how we have accumulated and the lessons we have learned to further forge our cooperation and together let us begin reshaping the future today.