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# Higher Education Development in Thailand

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## Introduction

The National Scheme of Education of Thailand, effective since 1977, has defined "higher education" as "education after secondary education." Therefore, post-secondary educational institutions at all levels and categories are a part of higher education. Institutions of higher learning are of two types: governmental and private. Both are under government supervision since the provision of education is the function of the state. The government may delegate the sharing of this responsibility to the private sector, but the control remains with the government.

Today there are 16 government universities and institutions in Thailand. They comprise 14 traditional universities, an open-admission university and a distance teaching university. There are also 21 degree-granting private universities and colleges. Both government universities and private institutions are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of University Affairs. Each university is given the status of a government department within the Ministry, and university teachers are civil servants receiving salaries and fringe benefits equivalent to those of civil servants in other government departments and ministries. In addition, approximately 264 degree-granting institutions and non-degree post-secondary colleges operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Health, and other ministries as shown in the table on the following page.

The analysis of the relationship between higher education and development in Thailand will be confined to "university"-type education. Universities in Thailand are comparatively more comprehensive in both program offerings and major functions than other types of higher education institution. Whereas universities are engaged in such major functions as teaching, research, community services, and cultural preservation and promotion, other education institutions normally emphasize teaching solely for the purpose of producing graduates.

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Like the other nations of Southeast Asia, Thailand is experiencing a period of constantly accelerating diversification and growth in its institutions of higher education. The need for such change was initially stimulated by the manpower requirements and social attitudes which followed the Second World War, and then skyrocketed when the Southeast Asian conflict precipitated a vortex which drew the latest foreign technology into Thailand at a rate almost too fast to permit assimilation. As attention from abroad started local industries spiralling, the urgent need for specialists in certain fields which had scarcely existed before 1960 became an issue that is probably familiar in all countries in the area.

***Classification of Higher Education Institutions***

Control Support	Ministry of University Affairs	Ministry of Education and others
Government	<p><b>Government Universities</b> 11 universities 5 institutes</p>	<p><b>Government Colleges</b> <b>Ministry of Education</b> 1 College of Technology and Vocational Education with 29 campuses 78 Technical Colleges 34 Vocational Colleges 45 Agricultural Colleges 36 Teacher Training Colleges 17 Physical Education Colleges 10 Dramatic Arts Colleges 1 Fine Arts College</p> <p><b>Ministry of Public Health</b> 21 Nursing Colleges</p> <p><b>Government Specialized Institutions</b> <b>Other Ministries</b> 4 Military/police academies 2 Military/police nursing schools 10 other ministries' schools 1 Nursing College under Bangkok Metropolitan Administration</p>
Non-Government	<p><b>Private Institutions</b> 4 universities 17 private colleges</p>	<p><b>Private Specialized Institutions</b> 1 Nursing College of the Bangkok Seventh Day Adventist Hospital 2 Buddhist Colleges 1 Asian Institute of Technology</p>

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Although it was accomplished under enormous pressure, post-war high-level educational development in Thailand did not start from scratch, nor did it lack organization. Even the most recent policies have evolved from a tradition which can be traced directly back to the foundation of the country's first university, Chulalongkorn, in 1917. The task of Thai educational planners and administrators has been, therefore, not only one of funding and staffing the "flash-flood" of new degree-granting institutions, but also of controlling and consolidating them into a form reconcilable with the system of education which has grown along with Thailand's modern culture and economy for more than half a century. Only in such a way could a sense of continuity and national identity be preserved in arranging to meet the educational and manpower needs triggered by new concepts of industry, technology, and management in modern Thailand.

### **Historical perspective**

Thailand's first universities were founded exclusively to provide skilled personnel for government service. By the time Chulalongkorn University achieved its status as a university by Royal Decree in 1917, it had already existed since the end of the previous century in a series of embryonic forms, such as the Royal Pages' School and the Civil Service College.

Until well into the post-Second-World-War period the growth of Chulalongkorn University correlated with steps taken for modernization by the Government. Expansion of the curriculum occurred only when specialists were needed in areas not covered by existing educational facilities. Students desiring knowledge in fields of study beyond the compass of Thai university curricula for reasons unconnected with government work comprised a tiny elite who pursued their education abroad.

Immediately after the revolution of 1932, which transformed Thailand from a monarchy to a democracy, there was a need for government officials trained in the techniques of democratic government. In response, the University of Moral and Political Science (Thammasat University) was established in 1933 to provide the training necessary to produce political leaders and civil servants of the new type.

Total affiliation between the Government and the universities underlay the foundation of three more institutions in 1942: the University of Medicine (Mahidol), the University of Agriculture (Kasetsart) and the University of Fine Arts (Silpakorn). Once again the function of these institutions was to provide government personnel trained to a high-level of competency in their respective disciplines and professions. Thus by the end of the Second World War five universities had been established in Thailand and although their specialization may be called into question, their status as universities and their combined function as an organized system of higher education cannot be denied.

After 1945 this system became the foundation of a new era of controlled development that may be the most intense ever experienced anywhere. As the media and transportation

facilities which had been developed to vastly increased levels of efficiency by the needs of the war began to homogenize world culture, the previously rather hermetic traditions of Thailand were brought into forceful contact with progressive western methods. The university educational system as it stood became obsolete, geared as it was to the needs of the pre-war Government.

As advisers began to pour in from abroad, the cry went up from private industry for experts trained in areas of technology previously unheard of in Thailand. With the coming of the Indochina War in the early 1960s and its subsequent escalation, this process of adaptation and diversification became so frenetic that a series of five-year development plans was put into action to help steer it towards the fulfilment of burgeoning manpower and research requirements. The forces affecting development of higher education had completely shifted. Before the war the university functioned as a training ground for government personnel, now the developments of the post-war decades catapulted it into the role of supplier of specialized manpower to both public and private sectors. Consequently, it became the most important force in national development.

Recrystallized social demands began, for better or worse, to place university education in a seductive light it had not previously enjoyed. This phenomenon, observed by Ivan Illich,<sup>1</sup> made high-level education the ultimate status symbol, dividing those who had "made it" from those who had not. The number of high-school graduates demanding access to higher education rapidly increased.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, institutions of higher learning organized around specialized areas of learning were opening at the rate of almost one a year, along with more diversified institutions being founded for the first time outside the capital city of Bangkok. Chiangmai University opened its doors in 1965, to be followed by Khon Kaen University (1966), The National Institute of Development Administration (1966) and Prince of Songkhla University (1968). In 1969 a law was passed permitting the establishment of private colleges of advanced learning, for the first time. Despite their having no financial support from the Government, these private colleges and universities organized their curricula to satisfy manpower requirements by emphasizing technical and business studies, thus illustrating once again the importance of manpower demands as the chief force behind educational development in Thailand.

The concept of the Open University made its debut in Thailand with the inception of Ramkhamhaeng University in 1971. Ramkhamhaeng University makes higher education available to students who, for either financial, geographic, or academic reasons, have no access to the country's selective-admission universities. As an academic market university, Ramkhamhaeng University adopts an open admission approach to classroom activities where

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<sup>1</sup> Illich, Ivan D. *Deschooling Society*. New York, Harper and Row, 1974. 116 p.

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attendance is optional. By 1979 student enrolment had reached 110,000, and a second campus was required.

To allow Ramkhamhaeng University to restrict the number of students and at the same time to provide broader educational opportunities to working adults, the Thai Government in 1979 established a new open university called Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University. This new university has no conventional classrooms and has adopted the distance teaching and learning system. The teaching and learning process depend largely on integrated media, correspondence, radio, television and tutorial services at various study centers located throughout the country. It is open learning based on the principle of lifelong education. The idea has been advanced, for example, that the Open University might provide the ideal answer to the country's crucial need for a "second chance" education. Working professional people would accordingly be able to update their knowledge and upgrade themselves by enrolling in courses which would not conflict with their work schedules. Others, forced to interrupt their studies to seek employment, would be able to continue to study in their own time.

### **The present situation**

Although Thai university education is now approaching the point where it can be considered favorably in quality and scope by international standards, there are still many obstacles that pose severe problems to administrators working in the field of educational planning. As the central agent of national development, the university is being called upon to meet manpower requirements that would have been unimaginable a decade ago. Computer science, agro-industry, solar energy, and appropriate technology are just a few of the dozens of areas of knowledge that have shifted from the periphery to the center of concern. Thailand has far too few specialists in most of these fields. Before the country's universities can fulfil their basic functions of research and dissemination of knowledge, the crippling shortage of staff, funding, and facilities must be alleviated. Although these needs are most pressing in the regional institutions, even the best endowed of the universities in Bangkok are severely handicapped by these drawbacks.

The series of five-year development plans initiated in the 1960s aimed to foster controlled expansion and focus it directly into those areas considered critical in relation to national development. The first two Educational Development Plans were oriented directly towards economic development, with the object of providing high-level manpower. The Third Plan, at the request of the universities, placed a greater emphasis on research and social and cultural development in addition to supplying high-level manpower. Institutes for Population Studies, Thai Studies, and Computer Science were established in several universities under the provisions of this Plan. The Fifth Plan, currently in effect, aims to strengthen manpower production, research, community services, and cultural preservation and promotion.

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To date the plans have been largely successful in channelling educational expansion to the national advantage. There have been miscalculations – as is inevitable when long-range forecasts must be taken as the basis for policy-making – resulting in overfulfilment of certain formerly pressing manpower demands. At present, for example, more graduates in social sciences and humanities have been produced than can be absorbed. But the advantages of the plans greatly outweigh the mistakes, and the Educational Development Plans have so far been a qualified success.

### **Problems and prospects of expansion and consolidation**

As should be evident by now, most innovations in the Thai higher education system have been in the direction of expansion, as consolidating measures have been more or less built into the policy of allowing university growth to follow the lines of the existing system. Most of the problems that have been encountered in the post-war boom have been solved by exercising selectivity and control over logical extensions of this system. Still, the almost total specialization of most of Thailand's universities which extended into the decade after the war suggested that the effectiveness of the system, and its capacity for accelerated growth, would be strongly enhanced by consolidation.

This need was diagnosed by Sir Charles Darwin when he visited Thailand under the auspices of UNESCO in 1954. After discussing the unsuitability of the word "university" when applied to such specialized institutions as the University of Fine Arts and the Medical University, and lamenting the lack of a shared set of standards among Thailand's five universities, Sir Charles speculated:

The best way of reforming the institutes of higher learning in Thailand will be to adopt a general pattern like that of London. The five universities should be called colleges and combined into a single federal university like the University of London, though there is no need to follow the details of its construction exactly. As long as Bangkok is the only strong center of learning in Thailand – and merely on account of the shortage of suitable staff this must certainly be so for many years – there is no need for a second body like the *University Grants Committee* to exist separately, since the governing board of the university could fulfil both function.<sup>2</sup>

Although its recommendations were not followed exactly, the report exerted a strong influence on government university policy. The five universities were not grouped together into a single institution; instead, in 1959 they were put under the direct control of the Office of the Prime Minister. Under this arrangement, teaching and academic standards were aligned and the stimulation and control of growth more effectively achieved.

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<sup>2</sup> Darwin, Charles, Sir *Report to UNESCO on science in Thailand* Paris, UNESCO, 1954 p 31

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The next major official consolidating effort was made in 1972, with the setting up of the Office (now the Ministry) of University Affairs. The close co-operation made possible through the establishment of this Office produced a "family of universities" that is very much in the spirit of the improvements envisioned in the Darwin Report. The Office of University Affairs fulfilled for the first time the need for a single consolidating agency which permitted the universities themselves to have access to the Cabinet.

Another co-ordinating measure is the bi-monthly Rectors Conference which facilitates communication among the 14 currently existing state universities by giving the rectors of these institutions an opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss problems. The conference does not intrude into matters of specific concern to one particular institution; its distinguishing feature is its limitation of discussion to issues of common interest to the member institutions.

Finally, joint research projects, co-operative programs involving such procedures as faculty exchange, a common academic calendar, the sharing of certain facilities, and student cross-registration, all play roles in consolidating the higher education system.

## **Conclusion**

In the past two decades, higher education in Thailand has expanded rapidly. Initially the "manpower approach" was the main theme of expansion. In the last decade, the desire of the people to receive educational opportunities has greatly increased. This has resulted in the universities finding ways and means to meet their educational desires with rather limited resources. The "approach" adopted was a cross between the application of the "social demand approach" and the "manpower approach." The important problem was to find an "ideal" balance between the two approaches.

Comparatively speaking, restricting the number of students in the selective-admission universities to conform with manpower requirements is less difficult to implement than carrying out the same restrictive measure in open universities – sometimes virtually impossible in the latter case. The problem of unemployment will become more intensified for graduates from both conventional and open universities in the same fields of study. One possible solution, however, is to restrict the admission to Ramkhamhaeng University at a decreasing rate and, at the same time, offer distance learning as a continuing education opportunity for the masses as a part of "to learn and to live" under the adult education program.

Though Thai universities legally have teaching, research, community services, and promotion and preservation of national culture as their main functions, in reality, they are the supplier of high-level manpower more than anything else. Perhaps the universities should play a more active role directly related to national development and become a "knowledge industry" to foster academic advancement. The resultant progress in technology should act as a stimulating factor in the development of the manpower and most important, the "brain power" of the country. The universities have received the blessing of the Government to inten-

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sify and expand their efforts in the four stated basic functions to fulfil national development needs more effectively. It is hoped that higher education in Thailand will be more development-oriented in the years to come.

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