

## ASPIRING TO WORLD CLASS EDUCATION: CHALLENGES FOR THAI UNIVERSITIES TRYING TO COMPETE IN WORLD RANKINGS

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**Abstract** - Over the past decade, Thai universities have faced a dual challenge of implementing measures to enhance education quality while grappling with a decline in global rankings. The economic slowdown in the last two decades has prompted a call for educational reforms in Thailand to bolster the quality of the workforce. Since 2020, there has been increased pressure on the Thai higher education system to improve graduate quality and compete internationally. This has led to substantial investments, the introduction of a Thai quality framework, and a focus on sustainable development goals to overcome challenges associated with the middle-income trap. This article argues that inherent policies and practices within Thai academia hinder upward mobility in global rankings. It raises critical questions about how Thailand can integrate its cultural requirements into the pursuit of higher rankings, adapt to internationalization without merely following Western standards, and reconcile with the prevalent influence of Anglo-Saxon paradigms in Asian academic practices.

**Keywords:** University Rankings; Higher Education; Internationalization; Thailand Education

### INTRODUCTION

For the last decade, university educators and administrators in Thailand have been inundated with various measures to improve the quality of education all the while observing the gradual decline in the Thai university global rankings. Given the deceleration in economic growth over the past two decades, a prevalent perspective suggests that Thailand should embark on educational reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of the workforce. Since 2020, the Thai higher education system has been under increasing pressure to improve the quality of graduates and to compete within the international arena of university rankings. To achieve this goal, Thailand has been investing heavily into the education system, implementing a quality framework system and encouraging greater awareness and adoption of sustainable development goals. These strategic initiatives are seen as imperative to overcome the challenges associated with the middle-income trap. This article will argue that policies and practices endemic to Thai academia impede Thai universities ability to rank upwards as time passes.

While population growth rates have significantly decreased, the last 15 years have witnessed a notable surge in higher education enrollment across Asia (Rumbley et al., 2022). This surge is primarily attributed to increased participation in primary and secondary education, a heightened societal and economic demand for specialized human resources, and a growing recognition of the importance of advanced education for future opportunities (World Bank, 2013). Remarkably, higher education stands out as the fastest-growing sector during this period. The expansion is a direct outcome of government initiatives that promote higher education providers, leading to a consistent growth of institutions in this sector. Consequently, the overall expansion of higher education in Asia has been particularly pronounced, with institutions playing a crucial role in shaping the evolving educational landscape (Levy, 2011).

In Thailand, undergoing a near constant yet gradual Westernization and privatization of higher education (Rhein, 2016), coupled with demographic shifts and sociocultural challenges (Rhein, 2017), the heightened competition for access to government coffers, tuition revenue from students and grant money from international collaborations has increased the need for social prominence. The ranking of higher education institutions is integral to this competition. With a growing interest



in global university rankings, Thai Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have actively engaged in the 'ranking game.' This trend has garnered significant attention from the government and media, with institutions like the University of Chulalongkorn and Mahidol University frequently vying for the top spot. These institutions, deeply rooted in the country's educational history, are highly competitive in terms of research output, faculty recruitment, student placement and attracting international students to their programs. They are also adapting their academic and research reward systems in response to national expectations for improved university rankings (Rhein &Nanni, 2023).

Yet Thai institutions are struggling to compete in the rankings when compared to other Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong which have traditionally held high positions. The intense competition among universities in East Asia not only serves as an indicator of institutional quality but also reflects developmental progress and national pride, aligning with cultural norms that emphasize the importance of a national 'face' in Asian societies (Holmes &Tangtongtavay, 1995. The rankings, viewed as a gauge of institutional quality, are perceived as manifestations of national excellence and increased potential for socio-economic competition. The global university rankings go beyond ranking individual schools or programs; they are seen as indicators of a nation's economic power, particularly in Southeast Asian nations, such as Thailand. The influence of the rankings extends across various facets of academia, notably impacting the publication culture and subsequently affecting teaching, administration, and research (Ganotice et al., 2017). In Asian universities, rankings hold significant importance due to their impact on international recognition, competitive advantage, and national development(Holmes &Tangtongtavay, 1995). The economic impact is substantial, as high-ranking universities are more likely to secure investment for advanced research facilities and infrastructure, contributing to overall economic development. Moreover, a prestigious ranking helps universities attract and retain top talent, both locally and internationally, fostering a diverse academic community. Governmental recognition and funding are often tied to rankings, reflecting the perceived effectiveness of higher education policies (de Wit, 2019). Lastly, rankings influence the perceptions of students and parents, impacting their choices and contributing to the overall prestige and success of universities. The emphasis on rankings has prompted shifts in the strategies and priorities of higher education institutions in Thailand, reflecting the broader impact of rankings on the academic landscape.

**THE GLOBAL UNIVERSITY RANKINGS SYSTEM AND THAI UNIVERSITIES**

There are several global university rankings indexes of significance, US News and World Report, Center for World University Rankings (CMUR), Shanghai, Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) and Times Higher Education. The later three are the most utilized by universities when marketing their institutions. When Shanghai University began ranking universities in 2003 there were a total of 500 universities surveyed and ranked (Shanghai Rankings, n.da). This has now expanded to 1,000 universities globally (Shanghai Rankings, n.db). QS began indexing universities in 2004 with a modest 200 universities survey and by 2023 had expanded to 1,421 (QS Rankings, 2024). Times Higher Education began its indexing in 2010 with 199 universities and has since expanded its rankings to 1,799 in 2023 (Times Higher Education, 2024). The general trend is one of both expanding the pool of universities participating in the rankings system but also segmenting into regions. Of interest to this paper is the natural outgrowth of competition between universities that engage in the hierarchical indexing which occurs on an annual basis. Connected to this which is the subject of this study are the internal limitations of Thai universities that restrict their ability to continually rank upwards as the years pass.

It must be noted that each ranking agency (QS, THE, Shanghai) utilizes a different methodology and weighting system to arrive at their annual conclusions. Below is synopsis of each ranking agencies methodology.

**Table 1: Times Higher Education Methodology & Weighting**

Criteria	Indicator	Weight
Teaching reputation 15%	Academic Reputation Survey among votes from cited academics and scholars	29.5%
Student to staff ratio 4.5		
Doctorate bachelor ratio 2%		
Doctorate staff ratio 5.5%		
Institutional income 2.5%		



Research reputation 18%	Peer reputation for research output and quality, number of Scopus indexed articles produced	29%
Research income 5.5%		
Research productivity 5.5%		
Citation impact 15%	Scopus indexed articles, 75 <sup>th</sup> percentile journals	30%
Research strength 5%		
Research excellence 5%		
Research influence 5%		
Industry income 2%	Industry and innovation of institution	4%
Patents 2%		
International students 2.5%	International outlook and engagement	7.5%
International staff 2.5%		
International co-authorship 2.5%		

**Table 2: QS Methodology & Weighting**

Criteria	Indicator	Weight
Academic reputation	Global Survey of academics worldwide	40%
Employer reputation	Global survey of employers	10%
Student to faculty ratio	Number of academic staff employed relative to the number of students enrolled	20%
Citations per year	Number of citations in Scopus for previous 5 years	20%
International faculty	Number of international faculty to student ratio	5%
International student ratio	Number of international students to overall student ratio	5%

**Table 3: Shanghai Methodology & Weighting**

Criteria	Indicator	Weight
Quality of Education	Alumni of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals	10%
Quality of Faculty	Staff of an institution winning Nobel Prizes and Fields Medals, Highly Cited Researchers	40%
Research Output	Papers published in Nature and Science, Papers indexed in Science Citation Index-Expanded and Social Science Citation Index	40%
Per Capita Performance	Per capita academic performance of an institution	10%

Thai higher education continues to struggle with rankings. Hallinger's study (2014) of national responses to university rankings in East and Southeast Asia, it quickly becomes apparent how the positives and negatives of the system can effect an upper middle-income country. Referencing the three main ranking systems, Shanghai, QS, and Times, Thai institutions rarely appear anywhere in the top 200 globally. Despite some movement upwards, the overall tendency is declining ratings (University Rankings). These samplings indicate the difficulties two elite Thai universities have in chasing the rankings. Even if there are internal qualitative improvements over time, their quantitative standings not only fail to keep pace but become lower as more and more institutions



of higher education, particularly from the Global North, are added to the overall listings. The global university rankings also illustrate how the number of listed institutions has grown rapidly, all of which are necessarily redirecting resources and funding towards other areas of higher education administration, bureaucracy and research that increase rankings.

**Table 4: Mahidol University Rankings in QS, THR & Shanghai Indexes**

Year	QS Ranking	THE Ranking	Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking
2004	Did not rank		Did not rank
2005	Did not rank		Did not rank
2006	Did not rank		Did not rank
2007	Did not rank		Did not rank
2008	Did not rank		Did not rank
2009	Did not rank		Did not rank
2010	228		Did not rank
2011	229	Did not rank	Did not rank
2012	255	351-400	Did not rank
2013	283	Did not rank	Did not rank
2014	Did not rank	Did not rank	Did not rank
2015	257	Did not rank	Did not rank
2016	295	501-600	Did not rank
2017	283	501-600	501-600
2018	334	501-600	501-600
2019	380	601-800	401-500
2020	314	601-800	401-500
2021	252	601-800	401-500
2022	255	601-800	601-700
2023	256	801-1000	601-700

**Table 5: Chulalongkorn University Rankings in QS, THR & Shanghai Indexes**

Year	QS Ranking	THE Ranking	Shanghai Jiao Tong Ranking
2004	Did not rank		Did not rank
2005	Did not rank		Did not rank
2006	121		Did not rank
2007	161		Did not rank
2008	166		Did not rank
2009	138		Did not rank
2010	180		Did not rank
2011	171	Did not rank	Did not rank
2012	201	Did not rank	Did not rank
2013	239	Did not rank	Did not rank
2014	Did not rank	Did not rank	Did not rank
2015	243	Did not rank	Did not rank
2016	253	601-800	Did not rank
2017	252	601-800	401-500
2018	245	601-800	501-600
2019	271	801-1000	601-700
2020	247	801-1000	701-800
2021	208	601-800	701-800
2022	215	801-1000	501-600
2023	224	801-1000	501-600



Marion Lloyd and Imanol Ordorika (2021) argue that international university ranking systems are inherently flawed because they are based upon standards from national contexts originating in a few Western countries that are then imposed internationally. Additionally, the rankings, they write, are “fundamental agents in the broader contest for cultural hegemony on a global scale” and “tools in furthering the hegemony of the US-based model of higher education” (p. 26). Thus, the ranking system lends itself to ignoring regional traditions outside the Global North and applying an educational template that rewards adherence to “neo-liberal, market-oriented logic” (p. 27). Lloyd and Ordorika essentially develop an idea that Philip Hallinger touched upon in his article a decade earlier that surveyed the impact of rankings in universities generally but more specifically focused on its impact in East and Southeast Asia. That is, the rankings play into a system that creates a single model for universities that want to advance their standing. This situation arises because the rankings reward those schools that are 1) large and wealthy enough to maintain comprehensive research programs across all fields but especially in the sciences, 2) are part of the Anglosphere, as English is the language of most research and research journals, and 3) are in the United States, because American researchers tend to cite other Americans at US institutions (Altbach, 2019; Marginson and van der Wende 2007). Marginson and van der Wende reported the conclusions of their study 2007 and the Altbach report for UNESCO came out in 2010, but conditions have not only remained constant since then, they may indeed have become more intense as universities seek to brand themselves as quality programs of study through worldwide comparative rankings. Thus in 2021, “Two factors strongly influence rankings and tend to help reinforce the perceived dominance of Western universities: language and resources,” writes Ralf St. Clair (2021), who goes on to note that “Despite the multilingual claims sometimes put forward, articles in English remain much more likely to be captured and recognized. . . .” and “It is easier for richer countries in the North to pay high salaries and attract research stars . . .” (p. 135).

#### THAI PROGRAMS VS GOING INTERNATIONAL

One important aspect of the rankings system is the recruitment of international faculty and international students. For Thailand, traditionally an exporter of students and faculty, this requires a shift in mindset towards internationalization. The global financial crisis of 2008 had notable repercussions on Thailand's higher education sector, marked by a surge in graduate unemployment, reduced funding for higher education, and a decline in student loans. In response, there has been a shift toward an inward-looking approach, reinforcing the country's resistance to the Western paradigm, as noted by (Wals, 2012). This shift is reflected in the sustained pursuit of the goal of localization, evident in the second long-range higher education plan spanning from 2008 to 2022 (Lauhathiansind&Chunbundit, 2016). Localization serves as an alternative national development strategy and a political discourse to address the heightened tensions in the contemporary world, according to the Commission in Higher Education in 2008 (Sinhaneti, 2011). Despite this localization emphasis, international programs within Thai higher education persist in setting tuition fees, often twice as much as those of Thai programs supported by state funds (Scott & Guan, 2023). Consequently, there has been a notable rise in the availability of international programs, catering to those who can afford the higher costs, thereby perpetuating the trend of full-fee programs. The competition among international programs for market share has led to the introduction of twinning and dual degree programs. Historically the majority of dual degree programs in Asia were provided by prestigious universities such as those in China and Singapore (Huang, 2007), however, the recent trend, particularly after COVID, is for greater institutional collaboration across Asia and the global north. These links between the North and South are intended to contribute to the financial systems in the North while improving credibility and research output in the South.

There are many well established and successful programs, such as Chulalongkorn University's Sasin program, in collaboration with Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, exemplify Thailand's growing engagement in international joint degree programs. However, a recent trend coming from universities in the global north is the tendency to leverage their reputation, and provide dual degree opportunities to students in Asia. Thailand, in particular, is common target whereby the western programs visit



campuses in Thailand and ideally sign a 2+2 or even 3+1 deal which provides the student with a degree from both the Thai and the Western program. For example, Rangsit University currently offers no less than ten 3+1 programs, There are other, lesser-known programs in this dual degree model such as those offered by Bangkok University which has partnered with no less than six Global North universities including Macquarie (Australia), Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom), Oxford Brookes (Switzerland), Middlesex University (United Kingdom), University of Canberra (Australia) and the International Management Institute (Switzerland). Similarly, Asian Institute of Technology is following the dual model by offering multiple dual degree programs including a dual degree program in Water Engineering and Management with Colorado State University, a dual degree in Geotechnical and Earth Resources Engineering with Colorado State University, another dual degree in Water Engineering and Management with the University of Iowa, a dual in Telecoms with Sud Paris France and at least 5 other dual degree programs with global universities. However, the cost associated with these programs is often prohibitively high for middle-class Thai families, posing a challenge to broader access and participation in such international education offerings. An additional administrative hurdle is that the creation and management of 3+1 programs requires quality control mechanisms to ensure proper course alignment, equivalency and standardization. Recognizing the imperative for a comprehensive affordable and quality assurance plan and an enhanced education management system to develop education and bolster the nation's economy, a pivotal development was initiated with the National Education Act of 1999. This legislative enactment aimed to ensure the provision of quality education for all. To actualize this goal, the education system underwent transformation, emphasizing self-directed learning for students and the widespread availability of educational institutions throughout society. This critical aspect is elaborated upon in the subsequent analysis session.

#### **THAI QUALITY FRAMEWORK (TQF): THE TAIL THAT WAGS THE DOG**

After the enactment of the National Education Act in 1999, the Office of the Higher Education Commission (formerly the Ministry of University Affairs) took on the role of overseeing higher education institutions in Thailand. The Office proposed quality assurance guidelines, which were approved by the Cabinet in 2002. The Cabinet then introduced comprehensive systems, regulations, methods, and measures for internal quality assurance in higher education institutions. The Office of the Higher Education Commission noted active implementation of internal quality assurance processes in 2014. The primary goal of these processes is to assist higher education institutions in fulfilling crucial missions, including producing graduates, conducting research, providing academic services to society, and preserving arts and culture. Compliance with quality assurance standards is mandated, driven by internal factors like the National Education Act of 1999 (Second Amendment in 2002), the Higher Education Standards in 2006 by the Commission on Higher Education, and the Thai Qualification Framework for Higher Education of 2009 by the Ministry of Education (OHEC, 2014). These frameworks require institutions to maintain education standards to gain societal confidence, compete globally, engage stakeholders, and uphold transparency and accountability based on good governance principles. All of which is needed for the administration and management of higher education programs. External factors, especially globalization and the establishment of the ASEAN community, underscore the need for educational quality guarantees in an international environment, emphasizing student and graduate mobility and cross-border educational services. This recognition of student mobility reflects a concerted effort to ensure and enhance the quality of education in Thailand's higher education landscape, aligning with global standards and in accordance with the goals of improving Thailand's positioning in the global university rankings.

Two decades after the NEA Thai universities still performed on average quite poorly. A primary reason cited for this performance was a lack of continuity in education policy with incomplete policy review cycles inclusive of change implementation. Second, was the bureaucratic culture of top-down administration mixing with radical political changes due to coups and increasing centralization of decision-making in the new Ministry of Higher Education and Innovation (Chaiya& Ahmad, 2021). This is an interesting linkage between political turbulence and a lack of policy continuity is an interesting one in those political objectives and beliefs permeate the education system strongly effecting overall quality.



### FOR MIDDLE-INCOME NATIONS, RANKINGS ARE EXPENSIVE

In 2018, the education budget registered a substantial increase of 50.35% in comparison to its 2009 counterpart (Office of the Education Council, 2018). Over the ensuing 8-year period, the mean annual growth rate in the education budget reached 5%. However, upon scrutinizing the distribution of expenditures within the higher education budget, it becomes evident that 91% of the allocation pertained to operational budget components, with a mere 9% allocated to the investment budget (Chaiya& Ahmad, 2021). In a parallel narrative to Benjamin Ginsberg's observations in the American context (Ginsberg, 2011), a similar transformation is underway in Thai universities, where the balance of power between faculty and administration is shifting. Much like Ginsberg's critique, the administrative apparatus in Thai higher education institutions is expanding, often at the expense of faculty involvement in decision-making processes. The increased bureaucracy is altering the traditional principles of shared governance and academic autonomy. As administrative roles gain prominence, concerns arise regarding the potential impact on the quality of education and research. The growing emphasis on documenting organizational efficiency and financial considerations may lead to decisions that prioritize administrative goals over academic values. This evolution prompts a reflection on the changing dynamics within Thai universities and raises questions about the preservation of the core principles that underpin higher education's mission in the country. Given the large multiyear investment in higher education administration, there was a clear need to substantiate the role of the administrative officials.

Following extensive investments and considerable efforts devoted to the formulation and subsequent training in quality assurance measures, the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC, 2014), the primary regulatory agency overseeing higher education institutions in Thailand, successfully implemented an internal quality assurance system (Chaiya& Ahmad, 2021). Internal quality assurance involves the establishment of systems and mechanisms for the development, monitoring, and evaluation of higher education institution operations in alignment with established policies. Objectives and quality benchmarks are delineated based on standards defined by the institution, and both the department and the educational institution collaborate to institute the internal quality assurance system for the school. In essence, this self-monitoring quality assurance system resulted in a substantial volume of documentation, with each program, faculty, and institution responsible for maintaining comprehensive records of quality. This situation presents evident challenges due to the burdensome documentation requirements, increased workload, substandard quality of assessors, and deficiencies in the quality of assessments. Assessment methods relying heavily on documentation, including inadequately designed systems for reporting information within the assessment report, exacerbate the issue. Specifically, the school quality assessment system primarily employs internal quality assessment at the school level as the principal unit for evaluating and enhancing educational quality. Not surprisingly, almost all programs pass their internal quality control assessments.

Ensuring quality assurance is essential for the development of higher education, serving as a policy tool to gain insights (Neave, 1998). The improvement of higher education quality contributes to enhanced student learning outcomes and fosters economic development (El-Khawas, 2013). Quality assurance policies also play a role in encouraging students and parents to invest in the quality of education. However, even after two decades of enforcement, the outcomes of the Act have fallen short of expectations, particularly with a low score for the quality assurance system, while access and sustainability scores remain high (Fry, 2018). Thailand's education system stands at a critical juncture. To surpass the middle-income trap, the nation must cultivate a highly skilled workforce. Although the quantitative aspect of educational provision has been addressed, the qualitative dimension poses challenges. Despite the substantial investment in education, the benefits have not been widely distributed, and Thailand has not realized the anticipated return on its investment in higher education. Another barrier to Thai universities ascendance in the global university rankings is the impact of various aspects of culture. The subsequent sections of this article will outline the role of Thai academic culture, political / bureaucratic culture, the research culture.

### LACKING AN ACADEMIC CULTURE

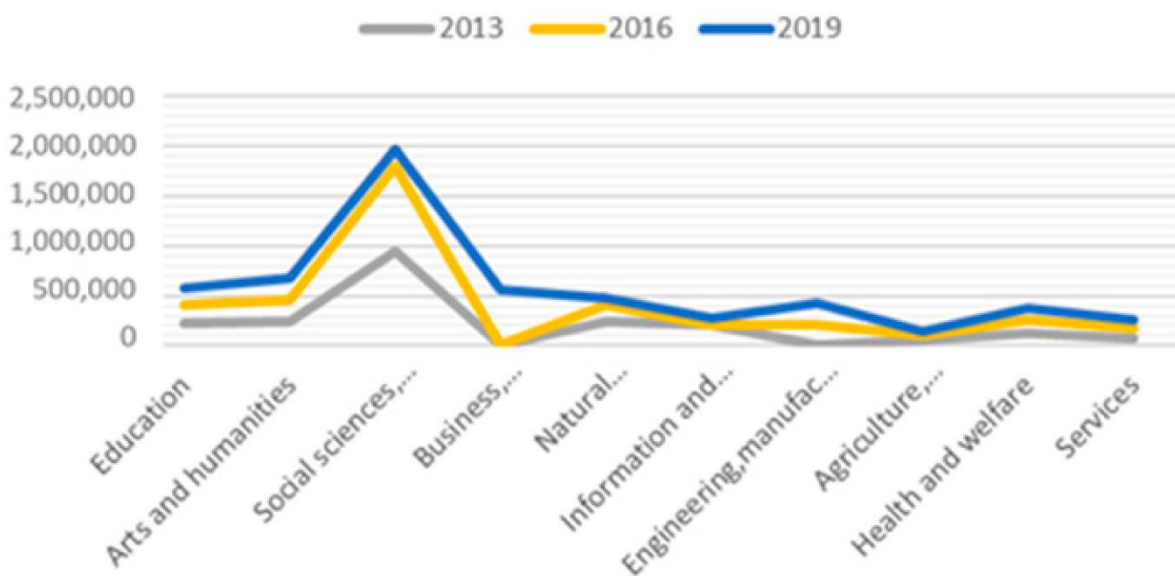
The imperative for Thailand to compete globally rests on the development of high-quality graduates, marking a departure from the 20th-century emphasis on mass education. In the 21<sup>st</sup>



century, the focus has shifted towards producing a skilled workforce equipped with critical thinking abilities, problem-solving skills, and international engagement. Despite these aspirations, Thai higher education has struggled to meet international standards, consistently falling behind its regional counterparts. The 2014-15 World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report reveals a decline in Thai educational standards, ranking 8<sup>th</sup> out of 10 ASEAN nations (Schwab, & Sala-i-Martin, 2015). Similar results are reflected in the QS World University survey. Additionally, the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) highlights diminishing scores in science, math, and reading among Thai students, positioning them significantly lower than other ASEAN nations, ranking fifty-fourth among seventy surveyed countries. The prevalence of social science graduates and a shortage of graduates in science, technology, engineering, and math further underscore the challenges (OECD, 2023). While a quality assurance system has been implemented to address these structural issues, the extensive documentation involved places additional burdens on already overworked and underpaid faculty, as noted by Lao (2015).

Thai higher education predominantly prioritizes the marketability of curricula based on the potential financial stability of individual programs rather than following a nationally guided agenda. The labor market's needs are not adequately addressed as higher education institutions lean towards offering popular and student-friendly courses, such as entrepreneurship or media design, instead of focusing on disciplines that align more closely with industry demands, like high-level math or engineering programs. This strategic approach is driven by the universities' perspective on survival, recognizing that certain programs, such as entrepreneurship or media design, generate significantly more student interest than high-level math or engineering programs. Notably, a majority (60%) of students in Thai higher education enroll in programs related to social sciences, business, and law (Tangchuang, 2011). The trend in academic discipline and subjects has not changed over last decade and a half with the social sciences being overly pronounced.

Distribution of students by study subjects in Thailand in 2013, 2016, and 2019



(cited in Chaiya and Ahmad, 2021 p. 9490)

Given the disparity between student interests and industry needs, where universities perceive students as customers in a buyer's market, the challenges of meeting national labor demands are likely to persist (Buasuwan& Jones, 2016). This orientation underscores the importance of reevaluating the alignment between educational offerings and labor market requirements for the benefit of Thailand's educational landscape (Tangchuang, 2011; Buasuwan& Jones, 2016). Addressing the incongruity between Thai higher education and the labor market is imperative for sustained national interests. As ASEAN economies ascend, there is a pressing societal need to transition from a manufacturing state sustained by inexpensive, undereducated labor to a more





innovative and technologically advanced knowledge-based economy. Compounding the challenge is the recent trend of grade inflation, a global phenomenon affecting Thai higher education. The contemporary grade distribution system does not accurately measure the quality of student competence. While the rapid expansion and processing of a substantial quantity of students in the twentieth century are commendable achievements for Thai education systems, there remains a substantial gap when evaluating the quality of students' educational outcomes. Research indicates that despite Thai students spending more time in classrooms compared to their international counterparts, PISA scores and other international assessments portray a concerning picture of the Thai education system's efficacy (Tangkitvanich&Sasiwuttiwat, 2012). Importantly, this issue is not rooted in financial constraints, as the Thai education budget has significantly increased over the past fifteen years. Nevertheless, Thai student performance continues to decline despite the doubled education budget (Tangkitvanich&Sasiwuttiwat, 2012).

### RESEARCH CULTURE IN THAILAND

Nothing illustrates the dilemma facing major Thai universities that seek to improve their rankings better than the issue of research. One of the major components in determining ranking, research that contributes to higher standing is itself part of a ranking system (Hallinger 235). Journals with high impact, meaning they generate large numbers of citations, then determine overall university ranking. And most of those journals achieving high impact are English language journals published in the United States or United Kingdom. In 2022 Thailand hosted a total of 73 journals indexed in Scimago. Of the 73 only 4 were in the Q1 (top quartile) of journals and only were coindexed in Web of Science. Furthermore, of the 73 listed Thai based journals in Scimago only 21 of these were coindexed in Web of Science and 1 of the 4 Q1 journals also coindexed (SCIMAGO, 2022a). Compared to its closest ASEAN peers of Thailand is lagging behind as Malaysia hosts 112 Scimago titles with 7 in Q1 and of the 112 Scimago titles 57 coindexed in Web of Science (SCIMAGO, 2022b). Indonesia hosts 115 Scimago titles with 13 in Q1 and 33 of the title coindexed in Web of Science (SCIMAGO, 2002c)

Another important aspect of the rankings systems is the ratio of faculty with academic positions (Assistant, Associate or full Professorship) as compared to lectures. This is particularly problematic as the predominant academic title (78% of faculty) in Thai universities is "lecturer" (Chaiya& Ahmad, 2022). This situation arises because research output stands as the most prevalent requirement for attaining academic positions such as Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, or Professor. Historically, a significant portion of faculty members accepted the title of lecturer and focused primarily on teaching, with limited enthusiasm or incentives for scholarly publications (Sinlarat, 2004). As Hallinger (2004) pointed out, the implementation of change in the Thai context encounters specific challenges rooted in cultural and institutional factors. Although the pace of change has been gradual, it is discernible. Presently, driven by factors like globalization, internationalization, and increased competition for a prominent position in the university rankings, a culture emphasizing scholarly publications is beginning to emerge in Thai universities, particularly in the capital, Bangkok.

One problematic aspect of promoting a research culture is the overall lack of English among teaches and academics in Thailand. According the English First (EF) in 2018, Thailand ranked 64th on the list of over 100 nations in terms of English language proficiency, which put it in the "low proficiency category". The following year, the country's ranking dropped to 74, and further down to 89th in 2020, 100<sup>th</sup> in 2021, and 97<sup>th</sup> in 2022. In 2023, Thailand ranked 101 out of 113 nations in terms of English language skills

For Thai scholars publishing in Thai, the options are severely limited (ThaiJO). They can elect, of course, to publish in English language journals, where the large number of professional journals and journals in wide ranging academic fields certainly allow for a Thai perspective. Journals that focus on Thailand, however, are not great in number, and those of any impact run towards the likes of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* and *The Journal of the Siam Society*. Otherwise, some universities publish their own in-house journals that allow for faculty to maintain the required contributions to research. Thus the channels open to publication seem in conflict with the goals and purposes of higher education in Thailand. Should the country be forced into the situation where it adopts the standardized academic system in place throughout the Global North in order to gain



impact at the cost of subject matter and research that applies to Thai culture? Are Thai universities to become a place where:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the trend toward isomorphism can still be observed and tends to restrict the development of differentiated academic systems. [And where] Public authorities need to ensure diverse academic models to serve varied societal needs, while many academic institutions still tend to emulate the research universities at the top of the system” (Altbach, et. al., 18).

A university system built to mimic those in North America and Europe will inevitably curtail the research and teaching goals of institutions of higher education that build upon their own culture and traditions. In making one size fit all, education garnered through the assumptions of shared national and regional experiences gives way to globalized templates as imagined in countries half a world away.

One way that Thai universities might overcome this aforementioned dilemma is through their international colleges and programs. Such colleges form part of the faculties of several of the larger Thai universities, including Chulalongkorn, Mahidol, Thammasat, and Bangkok University. In the past, the term “international college” meant that instruction was in English, although in recent years classes and curricula taught in Chinese has been added to many of these programs. It would seem natural that a faculty consisting of native or fluent English speakers, with research degrees, could bridge the Thai-centered faculty and its domestically-oriented publications and the needs of these universities for publications in top-ranked journals. That this has not occurred indicates that along the way, the recruitment of international faculty has itself been unable to meet the needs of those administrators seeking better standards in global rankings. Too often, only a handful of faculty members publish in impactful journals.

Faculty members failing to participate fully in research activities does have a consequence both at the faculty and institutional levels. The previous decade has seen the introduction of annual performance agreements with the incorporate teaching, academic services, administrative tasks, consulting and research publication production. The incongruent structures, communication and regulations are argued to be a primary impediment for faculty progression and Thai universities to reach broad degrees of world class achievement (Chaedddhananan&Dhirathiti, 2022). The increased performance pressure among academics who are unfamiliar with academic publishing and whose careers previously were defined by teaching responsibilities alone have had severely damaging effects. Thai academia was rocked in 2022 and 2023 when 33 university lecturers were found to have engaged in buying data and having academic articles ghost written (Bangkok Post, 2023; Lem, 2023)

The linkage of career advancement It directly effects the reading culture of universities. On the one hand, faculty publications remain few and the reading for research as well as keeping informed of development within their discipline disappears. On the other hand, Thailand is already a culture in which reading is minimally important at all levels of education. Learning at the university level, then, is squeezed from both ends. Education comes to equal transfer of knowledge and facts, with relatively little supplemental reinforcement from texts.

#### METHODS AND GOALS

Lack of research inevitably leads back to a lack of credentials, which also factor heavily into rankings. Credentialism, or the sole focus on acquiring certification of accomplishment through accredited institutions, however, has its dangers. It undoubtedly produces some stagnant systems that tend to value uniformity over creativity. And that in turn leads to adherence to established measurements that may themselves become obsolescent or rarified from productive learning. But it is at the higher levels of education that credentialism is most ineffective. At university level faculties, original thought and its application should deliver results directly into the research path. That it does not happen is because credentialism often leads towards replicated exercises in publishing and a focus on incremental advances in research, both of which are important but not at the cost of deflecting away from new or even unorthodox ideas.

That said, credentials, if not credentialism, are a necessary beginning in most cases for most scholars. In a country such as Thailand where many of its universities lack both credentialed faculty and depth of research, the result has been mostly to default into the position of emphasizing teaching-only (or teaching-mainly) as the purpose of learning. That has also been an area of divide



among many global universities, but it has its greatest impact within higher education systems in the Global South. It is a challenge writes Altbach et. al. “to integrate the research function more broadly across the university. Cultivating more research capacity in the developing world is also critically important (133).” Why it is so is that it both sharpens academic focus and assists faculty in maintaining familiarity with and updating the current literature in their discipline. It also invigorates interactive classroom processes of learning.

It should be said, however, that there is one thing that Thai education does get right, especially at the lower levels and even into first- or second-year university systems. The much-maligned system of rote memorization does serve a productive purpose. Much of initial education has traditionally been based on knowledge transfer, which is what much of rote memorization is. It is one thing to emphasize the role of critical thinking, but if the students have no exposure to basic facts, principles, theories, or timelines, then there is not much to think about. The proliferation of online source material has made it seem, perhaps, that facts can be recalled when needed and no longer serve a useful part of learning and testing. That discounts the notion, however, that individual thinking needs its own source of “factual” recall. And that best occurs when the basics become transmitted via lectures reinforced with textual readings. Traditionally, that has been the methodology of four-year American universities, which realized that survey classes made possible later and smaller classes that worked towards passable understanding of the subject, then applied analysis, including evaluative critiques of texts and experimentation, and finally concluding with self-understood connections that result in new levels of created products, whether they be in the laboratory, primary sourced archives, or texts (including history, literature, painting, film, photography, and social theories). This argument is similar to that outlined in Bloom’s Taxonomy in the use and goals of learning objectives. Of course, the various levels outlined above, and contained within Bloom, should not be held separate but instead as a matter of focus, allowing for the interplay of the various “levels” where applicable and effective.

Accepting the validity and usefulness of this model of research integrated with teaching, administrators should be able to make the case for faculty research requirements because they improve teaching-only or teaching-mainly institutions. Aside from the issue of rankings and the successful branding that comes with relatively higher standing, a strong case exists that the two areas, often assumed to be in conflict, in fact complement each other. Qualifications for teaching, in particular, rest on a system of ongoing research, even if it is published or distributed only at the lowest of levels. In the end, research is what distinguishes college and university level learning from secondary and vocational schools. As such, it assumes a rightful place not only among faculty but students seeking advanced degrees beyond the baccalaureate.

### CONCLUSION

These arguments nevertheless lead back to toward the original questions: how does a country such as Thailand integrate its own cultural requirements into the quest for higher rankings? How do Thai universities adapt to a principle of “internationalization” that is not simply following Western, in particular American and British, standards? How do they come to terms with the fact that:

A number of Asian countries have just followed the academic practices dominated by the Anglo-Saxon paradigms. The introduction of English as the medium of instruction, the adoption of curricula from Australia, the UK and the USA, sending home students to study overseas and establishing international exchanges, coupled with the quest for the world-class universities as predominately defined by the Anglo-Saxon world, [which] have not only created a new ‘dependency culture’ but also reinforced the American-dominated ‘hegemony’, particularly in relation to league tables, citation indexes and the kind of research that counts as high status (Deem, et. al., 93).


Those elements in international colleges are still intact and even more reinforced than when Deem, et. al. wrote in 2008. The “dependency culture,” moreover, is still in place throughout the extended system of Thai universities at large. And what is even more fixed in place is the desperate search for higher rankings among Thailand’s perceived elite institutions. What this paper has outlined, however, is the contradictory measures in place and the lack of a sufficient educational infrastructure that will meet those goals. Without much concern about how to bring traditional Thai culture into the system, the overall effect is referred to the practices and standards common among universities in the Global North, while mixing in school uniform requirements and, in the



case of some Thai universities, trying to generate compliance towards Thai ways of acknowledging authority. All in all, the quest for higher rankings risks becoming “a meaningless search for excellence even where none exists (Deem, et. al., 85).

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