

# **The Management of the International Online Distance Learning Program in Thailand**

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## **Abstract**

*Online learning is popular throughout the world however the organization of online distance learning in Thailand does not reach the star. This research project aimed to investigate the situation in the management of online distance learning in Thailand with the focus on international programs which use English as the medium of teaching. Face-to-face interviews were performed with personnel involved in the management of international online distance learning program at Assumption University which is one of the two universities in Thailand that offer international online distance learning programs. The informants included the founder, administrators, teachers and staff of the Graduate School of e-Learning at Assumption University. The themes elicited were quality, acceptance and recognition, and teaching and learning styles. There were some difficulties regarding the three themes which obstruct the development of international online distance learning programs in Thailand.*

Key words: online distance learning, Thailand, Southeast Asia, teaching and learning, management of programs

## **Introduction**

Online learning is popular throughout the world. However, in Thailand, the success rate is still low. Although many universities in Thailand offer some sorts of online learning programs, there are only two universities that offer international programs online, Ramkhamhaeng and Assumption Universities. There are success stories and failure stories of online programs in Thailand. This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of the administrators and personnel regarding the problems and obstructions in the organization of international online distance learning programs in Thailand.

The Institute of Education Sciences reported a large number of students were taking distance education courses [1]. About one-third of students in higher education in the US are taking online courses and 65% of higher education institutions reported that online learning is a critical part of their long-term strategy [2]. Online distance learning is popular in the US as reflected by the growing numbers of enrollments and programs offered by tertiary education institutions in the US. The US is leading the world regarding online courses and systems [3]. However, while online distance learning is popular, its effectiveness was still remained questionable. It was found that 70% of students in online courses did not finish the courses [4].

Thailand has been taking the trend in technology development and developing the ICT infrastructure. Higher education institutions take the advantage of ICT infrastructure to promote accessibility to tertiary education for people throughout the country [5]. Unfortunately, several attempts of international universities to offer international online distance learning programs in Thailand did not work out as expected. The context is likely to have an important influence on the success of international online distance learning in Thailand. [6] reported that culture affected students' attitude towards online education and hence their motivation to study. The context of online distance learning in the Southeast Asia is rather different from the US. People in the developed countries are generally more proactive, IT literate, and individualistic while people in Southeast Asia, except Singapore, are generally more passive and collectivistic [7]. It is very likely that cultural difference plays an important part for the success or failure of online distance learning programs. Furthermore, [8][9] suggested that higher education systems in Southeast Asia have various limitations such as budget, quality and standards of education, faculty satisfaction and social demands.

The traditional teaching pedagogy in Thailand was teacher-centered [10]. Students prefer teachers to transmit information or knowledge to them. Students were accustomed to be passive learners. On the contrary, the online distance learning is structure on the student-centered premise. Students are responsible for their own learning [11]. Teachers act as facilitators or mentors in the online distance learning environment [12]. The perspective towards teaching and learning might hinder the organization of distance learning programs in Thailand.

### **The international higher education online learning programs in Thailand**

As of 2012, there were 79 public and 71 private higher education institutions and 19 community colleges in Thailand [13]. Most of them have established some sorts of online learning system and have policies to develop their systems further [14]. The first university in Thailand that offered formal distance learning program was Ramkhamhaeng University (RU) in 1971 [15]. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open

University (STOU) was established in 1978 as the first distance learning university in Southeast Asia that offers only distance learning programs [16] while Ramkhamhaeng University offers both distance and classroom-based learning [17]. All except two universities offer distance learning only in Thai. The Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) approved international online programs of only two universities in Thailand. In these universities, there are 6 programs accredited by the Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) [18]. All of them are graduate programs.

At the time of this study, Ramkhamhaeng and Assumption Universities were the two universities that offer online international programs (in English). Ramkhamhaeng University (a public university) offered one online program which is the online MBA program. Assumption University's (a private university) offered 5 accredited programs. These programs were Master of Science in ICT - M.Sc. (ICT); Master of Science in Management - M.Sc. (Management); Master of Education - M.Ed. (Teaching & Technology), Ph.D. (Teaching & Technology) and Ph.D. in e Learning Methodology (eLM) [19]. The programs have students from various countries including Asians and westerners.

## **Methodology**

This study examined the perceptions of the administrators and personnel regarding the organization of international program online distance learning in Thailand. The personnel involved in online distance learning programs in Ramkhamhaeng University and Assumption University were approached. Unfortunately, personnel at Ramkhamhaeng University were busy organizing the commencement ceremony where students from all over the countries showed up. They declined the requests for data collection. Hence, this research study included only personnel of Assumption University. The informants included the person who established the online distance learning school, the five directors of the five programs, instructors teaching for the programs as well as some selected staff who handle the learning supports. Face-to-face interviews were performed with all informants in order to elicit their opinions regarding the problems and obstructions in the execution of their programs as well as the teaching and learning process. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The information was compiled and themes were drawn.

## **Results and discussion**

Several issues emerged from the interviews. Most personnel agreed in the same direction regarding these issues. Some comments on students other than Thais also were derived, hence, at some points the researcher used the term Asian rather

than Thai students especially when compared with students in the west. These issues are as follow.

### **Quality**

The key issues were in the responsibilities and accountabilities in offering a quality program of study. Courses were normally compressed into a few weeks which might compromise the quality of the programs. Furthermore, some instructors prefer only asymmetrical communication while, in some cases, instantaneous communication would provide better results. In addition, online learning at home lacked learning and support facilities for research or infrastructures of a good educational environment. Group works could hardly be performed. The interactions, learning, sharing and reflections were minimal. There were also the organizational issues of the negligent of the management from a long distance. There should be clear standards ratings in all aspects such as the curriculum, teachers, materials used for teaching, courseware, the quality of examinations with feedback provided to the institutions offering such programs. There were little trainings of key personnel to handle the systems.

### **Acceptance and recognition**

The Thai government's policy and standards are designed towards classroom-based programs. The government is using the criteria for classroom-based with online system. Some of the policies are not compatible with distance learning. For example, there is a requirement for program of study to have certain facilities such as library, study rooms and etc. in order to be accredited. Students in other country such as Dubai might find it difficult to come to the main campus' library or they might be disadvantaged in this regard. The management of the online programs found many requirements make little sense and unpractical for the online programs. For example, the government insisted that students must be present individually and there must be proctors for final examination. Take home exams shall not be accredited. This has been creating problems for both the school and the students. Some students chose online programs, from the first place, because of their difficulty in travelling to school, for some reasons, but now they have to come for the examinations. On the school side, examination facilities and proctors must be recruited in other countries which incur costs and other formalities. In short, the government lacks the understanding regarding online programs and views online program with the mindset of traditional educators. This mindset obstructs the management of online learning programs in Thailand.

While in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, online programs are accredited and accepted by the public, in Thailand the public views online programs

skeptically. The lack of knowledge and understanding about the online learning causes the majority of the policy makers and employers to view the online degree program in a negative direction. There are problems of prejudice toward the online learning and students who graduated from the online program. Parents prefer their children to attend classes rather than studying at home. Employers do not view students graduated from online learning programs well.

### **Teaching and learning styles**

The online learning in Southeast Asian countries should be delivered in the similar fashion as in other countries around the world because online learning is accessible to all. The online learning in Southeast Asian countries should be developed in a way that it is accessible to others as well. However, the nature of distance learning is different from the traditional approach. Asian students were mostly not constructivists. While the distance learning program students should construct knowledge facilitated by instructors, students in Thailand were more traditional, i.e. rather passive. The teaching style might not correspond to the preferred learning styles. In general, their learning preference at tertiary level could be predicated on the way they had been learning earlier in the past (primary and secondary schools and even colleges). Rote learning had been ingrained in them and indeed their teachers and lecturers that the whole system was predominantly rote-learning. So logically, students doing distance learning would also expect to have rote learning as their primary learning or delivery style. Rote learning is difficult to organize in distance learning programs. In the west, generally, the teaching even at primary school level, is already espousing independence of thoughts. Thus, by the time the students get to the university level, they are already "trained" to be thinking critically. These students are therefore able to be left alone and carry out the learning critically and independently. That would be ideal in the distance learning setting. In distance learning Thai students' independence could create problems for them as they would not know what to do. It is important that the students are self-motivated and have the persistence to stick it out in case of difficulties, rather than giving up.

While the students in the West are used to reading, their Asian counterparts hardly spent anytime reading. Whether the delivery system of learning is on-line or through the post, students who are not already competent in reading and English will flounder.

The mode of study, the way the lecture presented, the way students are working on the activities should be a freedom of the instructor. The Southeast Asian countries could benefit from the diversity of classes and nature of the online learning instead of having everything standardized and controlled in such a way that there is no uniqueness of institutions or countries that offered the course.

An understanding of the students (as a class and as individuals) by the lecturer or module writer is mandatory. This would include finding out the students' demography, generation, reasons for doing distance learning, their previous learning methods, exposure to more modern learning methods, independent learning, reading skills, writing and expressions skills, English language competency (practical not just theoretical) and last but certainly not least critical thinking skills. An important question to address is how distance learning could incorporate the collectivistic nature of Asian students.

Accessibility to local assistance should be provided so that the learning is not going to be interrupted by difficulties in understanding the material, the problems they have to solve so that the interactive mode is practically achieved. An effective communication system should be established for students to interact with each other instantly.

## **Conclusion**

In order for online learning to be successful, the education paradigm should be shifted. There should really be no difference between the West and Asia in respect of distance learning organization but their implementations would need a very good and careful look. There are many newer learning and delivery methods that lecturers and program developers must take into account. Unless the distance learning program developers and executors are aware of the various investigations into generational gaps and novel teaching and learning methods, the distance learning program will not be successful.

In Thailand, a blended version as opposed to a full fledged online is preferred. Asian students needs more rapport and communications (face to face) to learn and share, and especially that Thai students are not independent or self-motivated or has much self initiatives as opposed to Western students who are more independent and responsible in managing their own work with more self-responsibility. As such, Thai distance learning should be a more blended, have more face-to-face rapport and communications with more group works than individual work. Though students might claim to prefer long distance, most of them worked better with a blended version with direct contact and sharing with lecturers and friends. Students prefer to control their own learning pace as well as having the instructor or facilitator to interact with them either asynchronous (discussion board or e-mail) or synchronously (skype or video conference). Students in the online learning environment where the instructors actively engaged with them were more engaged with class activities.

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