

# **The Students' Perceptions toward Ramkhamhaeng University Blended Distance Learning**

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## **Abstract**

*This qualitative research paper aimed to investigate graduate students' perceptions regarding Ramkhamhaeng University's blended learning practices which included face-to-face, eLearning, as well as other tools in the distance teaching and learning process. Focus group interviews were conducted with graduate students in regional campuses where distance learning was organized. Results revealed that most students prefer distance learning with blended tools. They perceived that blended learning led to social equalization, interactivity, flexibility, dynamic materials, interesting presentation, and motivation to the society and the students.*

Key word: blended learning, e-Learning, Thai culture, distance learning, face-to-face learning

## **Introduction**

The Information Technology (IT) has a strategic impact upon organizations and the society [1]. Traditional long distance learning was performed through traditional media such as mail, radio, television broadcasting, and etc. Nowadays, class content can be delivered through the internet system which creates a new form of distance learning. It was estimated that at least 80 percent of business schools in the US now offers online program for students [2]. The internet has been adopted by people around the world. North America had the highest internet penetration rate as a percentage of population at 78.6% followed by Oceania/Australia at 67.6%, Europe at 63.2%, Latin America/Caribbean at 42.9%, Middle East 40.2%, Asia at 27.5% and Africa at 15.6% [3]. Although the penetration percentage in Asia was on the low side, Asia had the largest number of population who used the internet with 1,076.7m users or about 4 times more than North America (273.8m). Within Asia, unsurprisingly, China led the group with 538m users followed by India, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Philippines, Vietnam, Pakistan, Thailand, and Malaysia. Thailand ranked number 9 in Asia with 20,100,000 internet users (30.0%) among which 17,721,480 were facebook subscribers [4]. The internet has provided access to education to a large number of people and helps to create a knowledge-based economy [5].

## **Online distance learning**

Students in the modern world were born into a digital world and they were internet literate [6]. Many educational institutions have adopted online teaching as an effective tool in the teaching and learning process for children in the net generation [7][8][9]. Online learning was adopted as one of the sustainable strategic movement for educational institutions [10]. Furthermore, online technology was used in various functions such as to process the admissions, enrollments, communication, as well as to share knowledge [11]. Distance learning offers more benefits than disadvantages [12]. Some of the advantages included time and distance convenience, fast feedback, students' control over their paces of learning, opportunities to review the teaching process, teachers and students' interaction, and accessibility [13]. Learners have the opportunity to absorb knowledge distributed in different forms and by different people, thus increase their confidence and independence [14]. [15] found that online students performed better than classroom-based students. On the contrary [16] reported from a meta-analysis that students having online instruction performed modestly better than students having only face-to-face learning and that blended learning was found to be more effective than either face-to-face or online learning alone. The literature showed conflicting findings regarding the students' satisfaction in e-learning. For example [17][18][19] reported positive results while [20][21] reported negative students' satisfaction toward e-learning.

## **Blended online teaching-learning process**

[22] suggested the role performed by instructors is important in determining the quality of the class. Their roles influence the success of the learning process and quality of students' experience in the classroom [23][24]. Teachers should encourage class discussion and involvement through teacher-student interactions [25]. [26] found a large proportion of faculty reported that face-to-face classes were more effective than online classes alone. Teachers' beliefs influence the ways they teach [27]. [28] concluded that negative opinions regarding online technology could prevent teachers from utilizing the IT to its potentials. [29] Many teachers resisted new technology [29]. [30] elaborated that teachers' resistance to technology included the resistance to intervention, organizational change, time management problems, lack of support, negative perceptions, and psychological factors. Teaching online should be different from face-to-face since the two modes are different. [31] has suggested that online learning is more than simply uploading the teaching materials and classroom interaction on a website. On the students' part, learners are different in their learning styles, directions and potentials [32]. [33] suggested that students' learning is dependent upon the students' inquiry process. They have different learning styles [34].

Online students should be self-motivated, patience and can manage their time and communications with others [35]. [36] suggested that attitudes towards online learning, learning style or preferences, time management, interpersonal skills, technical skills, and instructional designs could obstruct the online teaching-learning process. [37] suggested the advantages of blended learning system were: pedagogical richness, access to knowledge, social interaction, personal agency to suit various learning styles, cost-effectiveness, and ease of revision.

## Online education in Thailand

The Thai government has been trying to create infrastructure to facilitate institutional Knowledge Management (KM) and life-long learning in order that the Thai society would move towards the knowledge-based society. In relation to education, the government has been supporting the application of computer technology in education institutions. Table 1 illustrates the number of IT users in Thailand classified by age group out of approximately 63m population.

**Table 1. Number of IT users in Thailand classified by age group**

Age group	Computer users	Internet users	Mobile phone users
6-10	2,922,709	1,316,168	527,764
11-14	3,501,312	2,653,986	1,842,028
15 - 19	3,887,988	3,702,497	4,394,143
20 - 24	2,270,724	1,960,948	4,590,931
25 - 29	1,970,207	1,651,566	4,614,384
30 - 34	1,791,704	1,499,523	4,595,033
35 - 39	1,394,684	1,145,505	4,641,357
40 - 49	2,051,371	1,650,320	8,855,395
50 - 59	1,112,726	886,499	6,415,967
> 60	264,423	165,896	3,618,234
Total	21,167,848	16,632,908	44,095,238

Source: the National Statistics Office of Thailand (NSO) 2012 [38]

Thailand has been trying to provide equal educational opportunities so that people in the rural areas would have equally chance for education as people in the urban areas regardless of their economic status [39]. In the past, education in Thailand was limited to the urban areas. A couple decades ago, there were limited education institutions in the provinces hence it was difficult for provincial people to further their study from the mandatory primary and secondary levels. In spite of the government's supports to open higher education institutions in the provinces, the numbers of seats could not match the numbers of applicants. Nowadays because of the accessibility and lower costs, education institutions adopted the internet and utilized it as the tools to reach many people around the country.

### Ramkhamhaeng University's blended distance teaching

Before 1971, universities in Thailand had limited capability, regarding the facilities and personnel, to offer higher education to students. Moreover, many provincial students could not afford to study in Bangkok because of the high competition rate. The result was that many high school graduates were rejected from the higher education system. The government tried to solve this problem by establishing Ramkhamhaeng University (RU) in 1971 as an open university. The main purpose was to set up a place where high school graduates could further their study. The entrance examination was not required and the tuition fee was much lower than other universities to offer opportunities for low income students. All students who graduated from high school were welcome into the system. They could study in any field offered by the university with little restrictions. Since then a large number

of students applied to study with RU. In order to cope with a large number of students while the facility was limited, RU pioneered Thailand's first long distance learning system. Classroom-based instructions were offered and broadcasted through radio and television network to provide accessibility to students throughout Thailand. The long distance learning was developed into video conference through television satellite broadcast in 1996 [40]. With the introduction of the internet system, RU could offer teaching and learning to a lot of people residing abroad as well.

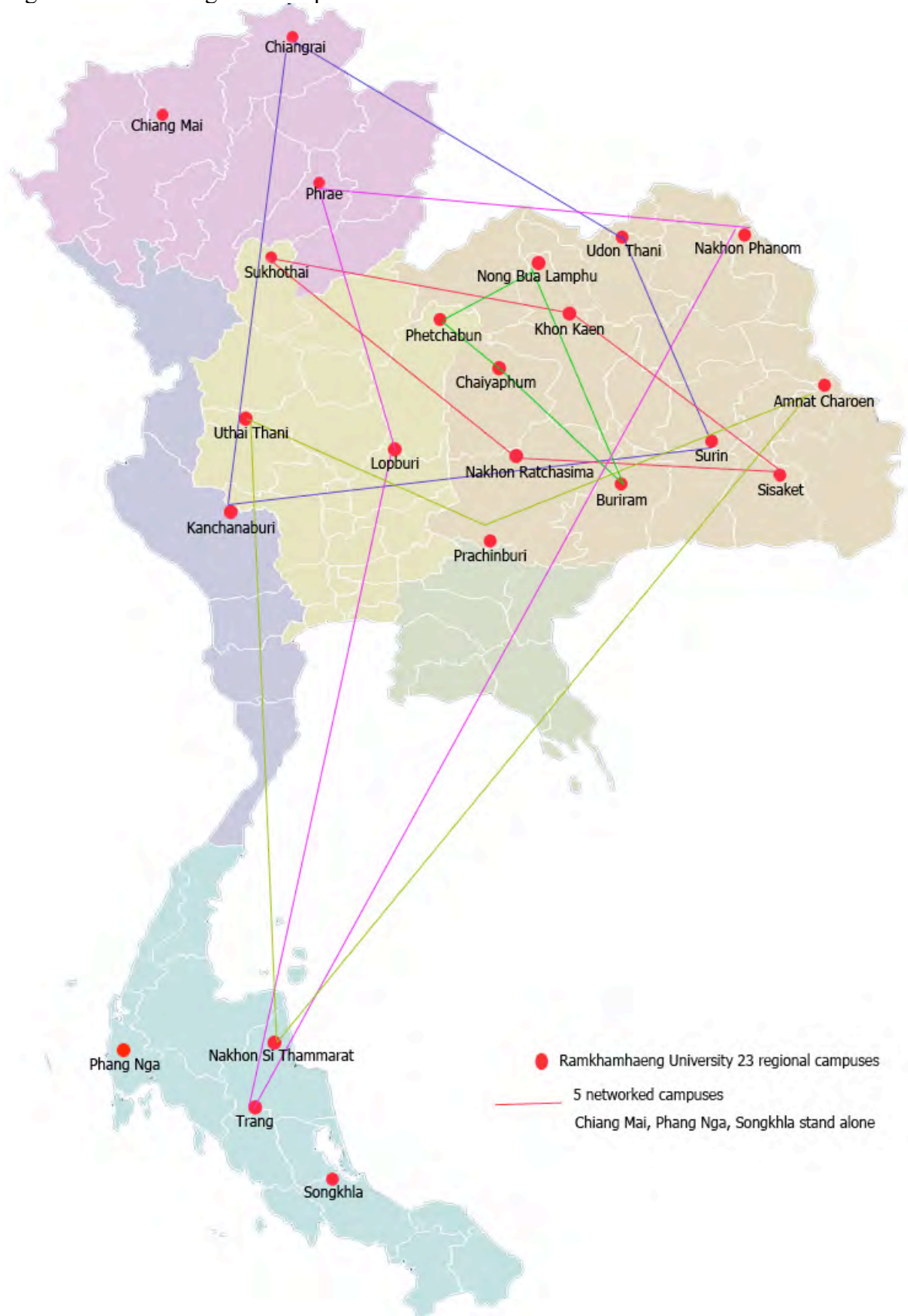
In 2012 RU operated 23 regional campuses, 40 regional examination centers and 47 regional academic service centers throughout Thailand. Through the long distance teaching system, several academic programs were offered for people living around the world not limited only to Thais. 41 centers were established in order to provide services and examination facilities for students abroad. RU opened 12 faculties, two institutions and one graduate school that offered 194 programs to students. Moreover, the Institute of International Studies at the main campus handled foreign students from more than 50 countries. Furthermore, RU had two IT coaches equipped with computers and satellite dish which brought the internet and computers to serve some 60,000 people in 70 provinces in the rural areas [41].

RU blended electronic and face-to-face teaching and learning process. Regional campuses were established to offer learning away from the main campus, hence, RU consider this distance learning. Several tools were combined to offer distance learning, i.e., CD's, webboard, email, and etc. The graduate distance learning system was organized in the way that students were mandated to register and attend classes at one of the regional campuses of their choice. The purpose was to promote acquaintances and interaction among students. Usually, students would enroll in the campuses close to their bases. 4 regional campuses were grouped into one node or network. One subject was taught at each node at a time, i.e., students in each network or 4-5 regional campuses would study the same subject at the same time. Teachers would visit one of the four-five campuses to conduct face-to-face teaching each week. In the following weeks, the teacher would visit another campus in the same node. Eventually, all campuses would be visited. Students would know teachers in person. The teaching process was broadcasted through the internet to other campuses in the same node at the same time. All students in the node had the opportunity to interact with the teachers either on the face-to-face or teleconference basis. The central area is covered by the main and suburban campuses. In this manner, students throughout the country have access to RU's classes. Some pictures of the instructor visited the regional campuses are shown in figure 1. The network campuses are shown in figure 1. Moreover, the classes were recorded and posted on the university's website as well as distributed in audio and video formats. Students could review the classes at later date [42].

Figure 1 The author visited classes in the regional campuses



Figure 1 Network regional campuses



## **Methodology**

The objective of this research project was to examine the students' opinions and preferences regarding the distance learning process of the university. Focus group interviews were performed at meeting rooms in 4 campuses belonging to the same node. 8-10 graduate students taking the same subject in these campuses were recruited for focus group interviews. The participation was voluntary. Questions related to the perceptions and opinions regarding the organization of the distance learning were asked. Students were allowed to freely comments and discuss their opinions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## **Results**

6 themes emerged from the analysis of the interviewed data. Most students in all campuses agreed in the same direction. There were very few conflicting opinions. The themes are as follows.

### **Social equalization**

The most evident theme was that students like distance learning because of the accessibility to education. If the programs were opened only in Bangkok as before, they would face difficulty traveling or moving to study in Bangkok while maintaining their jobs in the provinces. Some respondents said they would have to quit their secure job if they want to further their study. With the establishment of the regional campuses to provide distance learning, they gain access to higher education with less sacrificing. Even though they have to attend the classes which make it a partially distance learning, the campuses were in the vicinity of their hometown. Some respondents also mentioned the regional campuses offer opportunity for undergraduate studies in the provinces as well. This provides social equalization regarding access to education to students in all level in the provinces. The upgrading of education would lead to economic and social development in the long run.

### **Interactivity**

Many students reported they felt the teachers and colleagues were within their reach. They could contact the teachers at all time through either synchronous or asynchronous modes such as email or chat program which would not intrude the other party's privacy. If the others were "on," they could chat right away. If not, their query would be seen later when the teachers log into the system and the teachers could reply at their convenience. Sometimes they would contact the teachers through telephone. Moreover, students like to communicate with their colleagues to discuss and share knowledge, lecture, or summaries on the class's facebook account. They could ask for assistance from friends and teachers at any time. The interactivity provided students with supports in learning. They could talk to each other and learn as the whole team, thus created team learning.

## **Flexibility**

Students found it easy to review their lessons at the time of their convenience. Sometimes they did not understand while studying in classes. Sometimes they felt they were not ready in class such as when they felt fatigue or stress from work and could not pay attention to the teachers. They knew they had the chance to come back to the parts they did not understand later. This could lessen their stress and create more confidence in their study. Student knew they would not miss the materials. Moreover, different students might be unclear or need assistance in different parts of the courses and the teachers could provide different additional materials to different students.

## **Dynamic materials**

Students mentioned the teachers could update teaching materials or include hyperlinks to additional or complementary materials to provide better understanding. They reported that the materials were more up-to-date and relevant to them. Moreover, they had hand-on experience in using IT to retrieve and share knowledge with others. They commented that searching for information was less difficult than expected. If they were not enrolled in distance learning, they would be remote from using the internet as a source of learning and sharing with others. This enabled students to be engaged in life-long learning. They could continue learning from classmates and other people in other sphere of the internet even after they graduated from the university.

## **Interesting presentation of materials**

The blended media exposed students to a large array of information in various presentation formats. Electronic media have the capability to deliver rich content. Video, pictures, audio, simulation, activities, and others could be organized to assist students' learning and understanding. In addition, class information was based on real practices rather than from texts alone. This made the teaching and learning to be attractive and enjoyable experience.

## **Motivation to learn and share knowledge**

The blended system enabled students the convenience to participate in class discussion through their computers without being spotlighted in class. The sharing of knowledge could be performed easily. Many options were available for students to share ideas and opinions. They could join activities or follow discussions on the internet without being identified. Questions could be posed to facebook page or webboard without the identification of the recipients. Hence, questions were addressed to all colleagues. Those who were willing to answers would do so. Everybody had the chance to contribute ideas on everybody else's query. Through the IT system, the sharing of knowledge was not limited to only students in the same class but also students in other provinces and in other batches as well as outsiders. The barriers to learning and sharing of knowledge were reduced.



## **Discussion and recommendations**

The Thai culture is a high context and collectivistic culture [43]. Many students found learning through IT a distance, and hence, alienated approach. They need to familiarize themselves with the teachers and colleagues. In doing so, the characteristics including face and gestures of the others in various setting should be observed. Knowing each other through the internet make it difficult for this process. Hence, students need to see each other in real person in order to about learn each other before engaging in any activity. This is different from students in the West. Students in the US might start discussing about a group project right away and learn about each other later but Asian students need to know another person before they could cooperate with others. The result was that they prefer face-to-face communication with others. Only after they come to know each other, the convenience of the IT interaction could be utilized.

In the distance learning context, learners' mindset should be prepared from being passive to be more constructive. Students should be more active in seeking and selecting knowledge relevant to them. We could not assume students know how to learn from the first place especially when we are talking about using relatively new technology. Distance learning system needs students to be actively engaged in the class activities else they could fade down and remain silent. The teaching and learning would be unsuccessful.

While it is necessary for students to be active, teachers should realize their changing roles from feeding students with their information toward being a facilitator to facilitate students' quest for knowledge. Teachers should be well prepared for the unexpected and respond to unconventional questions from students. They should inspire students from within. This is much harder than teaching in the conventional mode. It is necessary that teachers should open their minds and accumulate a wide range of information rather than information in the texts alone. Class materials should be kept updated with the inclusion of real life practices. Students' activities through the internet should be planned properly to induce cooperation and learning.

Teachers should be excelled in using and application of IT. There are various advantages and disadvantages of IT. Teachers must know and be keen in selecting and incorporating appropriate tools in classes in order to expose students to various applications and excitement of the IT so that students would be motivated and able to apply the IT technology further. The potentials usage of IT network should be utilized to their utmost benefits. Linkages to both internal and external resources should be included. In addition, group works might be planned so that students would use IT to produce and deliver their assignments. Teachers also should be active in providing feedback on the internet.

Teachers should learn about students beforehand in order to plan the approach properly. For example, if students were technology illiterate, teachers might spend one or two sessions to familiarize students with the application of IT. Types of IT students usually used should also be studied. Teachers could rely on those tools and add other tools so that students would be exposed to other IT tools. The content of the class should also be prepared properly to make them suitable to learn through blended teaching and learning system.

The blended learning system should be designed in order to provide convenience to students in the modern era. Students prefer convenience. If the system is complex or difficult to follow, they would lose their interest. The materials

should be coordinated rather than dispersed. Linkages among the materials should be evident. The system should allow students to jump back and forth without losing track of the class. In this regards, hypertext is a great tool in link websites together. There is no need to put everything in limited number of pages which make it complicated and difficult to follow and take time to load the pages.

## Conclusion

Blended learning is becoming more popular through the development of the infrastructure that supports the internet system in Thailand. Several advantages and disadvantages of the internet are evident and thus teachers must be selective in choosing the right combinations. The main objective should be to offer convenience and learning opportunity to students regarding the content of the course and also the IT literacy or practices. From the results, blended learning of face-to-face and online distance learning was supported by Thai students. However, the process needs careful consideration and planning in order to attain successful implementation. The tools are continuously developed. Teachers should keep up with such development and be selective in using the modern tools in order to facilitate the teaching and learning process.

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