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Opening Thailand's University Classrooms

By Robert I. Tobin

Going Beyond The Classroom

It looks the same as any classroom from the outside—big, heavy, high wooden doors with strong locks. Inside too, it's like others I've seen—a big white space with a platform for the lecturer, a white board, student seats in front of long tables arranged in tiers. I'm shocked when I get inside.

I count about 100 students, but none of them are sitting on the chairs. Young people are all over the room—stretched out in front of the white boards, handmade posters and A4 size pictures. They're not quiet either. They're animated, excited, smiling. As for the professor, he's not at the podium delivering a lecture. When he is finally located, he's there on the side listening to a small group of students.

The students are sharing the results of interviews as part of an assignment that pushed them out of the classroom to interview senior executives in Thailand. They interviewed top executives, including several AmCham members, such as Richard Clarke of Thai Farmers Bank and Haiko Hadler of WE-EF Lighting who were kind enough to make themselves available for the students.

The students arranged and conducted interviews with more than 50 leaders, including a former prime minister, several bank presidents, judges, entrepreneurs, diplomats, and numerous foreign executives from Germany, Taiwan, Singapore, Canada and the United States.

Today, they are presenting the interview reports not from the perspectives of interviewers but as the person they interviewed. So, the student who interviewed Richard Clarke from Thai Farmers is giving a talk as if he were the bank executive. The student who interviewed Haiko Hadler is doing the same. They all talk with confidence—after all, they are executives at least for today—and they speak eloquently about their work and, without exception, their love of Thailand.

The students and the professor and several visitors are elated and inspired as they learn about each of the executives that the students interviewed. The students have gone beyond the classroom walls and have returned exhilarated. They have energized the classroom with their enthusiasm and new knowledge from outside the classroom's walls.

The interviews these students have conducted are just one of the many activities that transport students beyond the doors and windows of the classroom. These programs like field trips, exchanges, guest speakers, internships and practicums are providing substantial benefits to the educational and business community. They connect Thailand's students and universities with the business community, other universities, and community organizations, and are the focus of this article. Amid all the calls for educational reform in Thailand, these programs provide all involved with substantial educational benefits. There is also a benefit that might not be predicted—they provide a fresh perspective to many business executives who are stimulated by the students ideas and talents.

University Study Overseas and University Exchange Programs

You do not have to look very hard to find the many educational programs that recruit young people for study abroad. The educational pages of any Thai or English newspaper tout the benefits of studying overseas, and advertise the prep schools that will help students get the training they need for the tests they need-- the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), GMAT (Graduate Management Admissions Test) LSAT (Law School Admissions Test).

The students who complete a degree overseas return to Bangkok with new knowledge and increased status. Many jobs and careers welcome them precisely because they have the degree from overseas. In the words of Khun Rapiwongs Banchong-Silpa who graduated from Chulalongkorn and recently completed study for his Ph.D. in Economics in Japan, " a degree from outside Thailand makes you change from no one to some one." And the students gain confidence as well. They're forced to be independent, and are stimulated by new ideas. Khun Thanayuth Thongchindavong, a recent university graduate who is now studying Chinese in Shanghai recommends studying abroad: "even a short time course --because students can gain new experiences that they can't find in Thailand."

Now, many Thailand university programs offer exchange programs who wish to study at a foreign university for a semester, year or shorter term at universities around the world. Prince of Songkla University in Hat Yai has exchange agreements with more than



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100 universities. Students choose from Australia's University of Melbourne, Aalborg University in Denmark, as well as the University of California in Davis and the University of Kentucky for a semester or more abroad.

Chiang Mai University offers educational programs in collaboration with universities in the USA, Canada, Sweden and Singapore. Students enrolled in Sasin Graduate School of Business Administration, recently chosen by Asia Week as one of the top ten business schools in Asia, have more than 15 choices. These include a semester at Northwestern University, ESSEC in France, University of Southern California or Cornell. There's also an option where Sasin students can study for one year at Sasin and one year at York University's Schulich School of Business in Canada and obtain two MBAs.

Foreign students also come here to gain the experience of studying and living in Thailand and to enhance their own education. For every student who leaves Thailand for an exchange program outside of Thailand, there are students outside of Thailand who want to learn more about language, culture, business, religion, medicine, nursing, and other academic specialties in Thailand. The students do more than learn—they contribute a different perspective to classroom discussions and help local students understand another culture. The Kenan Institute Asia, a Thai-US not-for-profit organization, has promoted international education in Thailand for many years. Under its University Linkages Programs, KIASIA provides opportunities for American students to have international experience in Thailand. The Kenan Institute Asia also organizes Thailand study trips for US business schools.

WORK EXPERIENCE AND LIFE EXPERIENCE

Internship programs have long been a part of university programs. Students work for a set number of weeks or hours for a company. They gain intensive-on the job training, develop their managerial and communication skills and often get an inside track for a job after graduation. It's one of those win-win situations for everyone. Many AmCham members participate in these programs, including Colgate-Palmolive, Proctor and Gamble, Thai Farmers Bank and L'Oreal. Mahidol University's College of Management, founded in 1997 and located at SCB Park, is one of many universities which arranges internships for its graduate students with international businesses. KIASIA also has a program, "Alliances for Study Abroad and Internships in Thailand" to help American and other foreign students arrange both study abroad and internship placements.

Assumption University (ABAC) offers a practicum in consulting as part of its Masters in Organization Management (M.M.) program. Students in this program learn skills in organizational development, change management and leadership and they have an opportunity to use their skills on a consulting project with a company or community organization. Dr. Perla Tayko, Director and Designer of this M.M. program at Assumption as well as similar kinds of programs in the Philippines, is pleased to "see students gain the kind of hands-on experience necessary to be successful in the field they have chosen. They learn what it's like 'thinking-learning-creating-caring-connecting-working' on a team and developing solutions for and with clients." The students agree. They describe the company project as one where "[they] can apply what[s] learned in class to a real life situation in a client company", and "we should have more in-company projects like this for other courses as it teaches us a lot about real-life situations." Dr. Noel Jones, the professor directing the Organizational Development (OD) projects, sees "tremendous development in confidence and understanding among students during the OD projects. It teaches them about real-life situations that can not be taught in the classroom."

Other universities go outdoors for a different kind of educational experience. Mahidol's Master of Management is one of a growing number of university programs which starts the year with a "Ropes Program" –an outdoor adventure program where students and faculty work together to develop teams and strengthen student confidence, initiative and resourcefulness. It is an off-site program with all participants strengthening their own self-understanding, risk taking, and the knowledge of what it takes to be part of a team.

Outward Bound Thailand, offers a wide variety of outdoor adventure programs designed to help each participant have a better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses and develop their skills in different areas. At a group level, these programs have many objectives, including improved decision-making and problem-solving. Courses for university-age students and working adults range from the 6 day Outdoor Adventure program to the 21 day Ultimate Course.

Dr. Rebecca Chan Allen, has lectured at universities in North America and Asia. She is the author of Guiding Change Journeys, and has facilitated outdoor adventure experience for students. She has found "that students can have life-changing experiences, through out of school activities. She recently commented that, "both students and faculty benefit from seeing how ideas are applied beyond the classroom. Off campus activities such as field trips, field research, workshops or volunteer programs really bring academic learning to life."



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With all of these benefits and many programs to choose from, these kinds of beyond the classroom experiences are likely to expand as university education in Thailand implements efforts for reform.

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