

Editorial

Open Universities – Open Cities

Chulalongkorn University 100 Years

Kjell Skyllstad⁺ Editor in Chief

In March 1917 the first institution of higher learning in the Kingdom of Thailand came into being after a long period of preparations. King Chulalongkorn saw as one of his main goals as monarch to create a network of schools throughout his Kingdom leading up to institutions of higher learning. Following his vision of a system of education open to all:

“...All of our subjects, from our royal children down to the lowest commoners, will have the same opportunity to study – be they royals, nobles or commoners.”

King Chulalongkorn had already during his lifetime realized his dream of a city open to the wide external cultural, political and economic landscape, its walled zones and compounds having given way to internationally recognized borders.

Finally, the dream of an open university in an open city became true when King Vajiravudh on March 26 declared that the Civil Service College that had been in operation for some time should become Chulalongkorn University – CU as a memorial to his father. The university opened with four branches: The Faculty of Medicine, the Faculty of Public Administration, The Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Arts and Science with an enrollment of 380 students. Today the university has 19 faculties, 23 colleges and research institutes and serves an enrollment of 38,000 students.

The anniversary program was inaugurated by The International Association of Universities celebrating the Centennial for higher education in Thailand in Bangkok in November 2016, and introducing the Global Education Monitoring Report establishing the following goals for the function of higher education in the community:

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- Prosperity – promoting sustainable and inclusive economies
- People – promoting inclusive social development
- Peace – promoting political participation, peace and access to justice
- Place – promoting sustainable cities and human settlements
- Partnerships – enabling conditions to achieve sustainable development goals



Figure 1. Two views of the Maha Chulalongkorn Building on campus – A. Kinear.

The Chulalongkorn University leadership followed suit by formulating strategies for 2017-20 “...according to the vision of CU as a world-class national university that generates the knowledge and innovation necessary for the creative and sustainable transformation of Thai society. Divided into the four areas of Human Capital, Knowledge and Innovation, Local Transformation and Global Benchmarking, CU strategies 2017-20 are devised to fulfill the University’s missions which are as follows:

1. Develop graduates that have the academic ability, latest skills, public consciousness and also leadership
2. Pioneer and integrate knowledge, create teaching and learning and research innovation
3. Produce local and international academic research
4. Exploit knowledge for the sustainable development of the country and society”

The history of Chulalongkorn University has in a very concrete way been one of cultural and social outreach serving the needs of the community, not least in times of crises and growth. The focus on the principles of developing public consciousness, innovating local academic research and exploiting knowledge for sustainable development have all grown out of and been intimately connected to community service. A reconfirmation of adherence to these principles in research and public practice sets a standard for the academic world to follow.

Unfortunately the university ranking lists do not honor institutions for serving their communities. The latest rankings like the 2017 Times Higher Education lists are almost entirely based on the number of research articles published in the English language. International loss of prestige, however unfounded, is just one of the threats facing our universities and their cities alike.

One day in the early spring of this year the right-wing government of Hungary lead by Prime Minister Victor Orban passed a legislation intending to shut down the university that had been created to promote the ideal of an open society. This happened just four months after the US President Donald Trump had signed an executive order canceling federal funding to the so-called sanctuary cities affecting 400 cities nationwide committed to honor the same principle of openness so ardently defended by their universities.



Figure 2. Chulalongkorn University's Borommaratchakumari Building – A. Kinear.

Since 2010 Orban had been pursuing a policy of closing borders, putting, as NY Times remarked, nationalism ahead of minority rights. Political pluralism and international cooperation. Seven years later other statesmen and national governments have followed suit, first and foremost the new administration of the United States of America.

This trend of withdrawing from international cooperation has within a few years after the new wave of migration started to affect our countries led to ever deepening challenges in times when cities more than ever need universities as partners in developing and delivering local intercultural strategies. Responding to these challenges the University of Oslo in May 2015 cooperating with the European In-

tercultural cities network engaging some 70 universities across Europe, arranged a conference building trust in diversity; universities and cities joining forces.

As a common point of departure all parties agreed that universities serve a crucial function in delivering a robust knowledge base in the face of increasing extremism, xenophobia and hate speech, as well as promoting social mobility and equal opportunities. The conference aimed at exploring the crucial role that universities play in promoting community development, as a provider of research and knowledge. At the same time universities were seen as examples of global communities – sites of cosmopolitan citizenship promoting the well-being, civic engagement and interest among academics and students, as well as the cities they inhabit.

In line with these policies and since the establishment of the Urban Research Plaza network connected to the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, our Chulalongkorn University has been able to strengthen its commitment to community service. The overreaching aim has been to build a research and outreach organization linked to the citizens and the city, helping to maintain Chulalongkorn University as a powerful engine for cultural and social development in our diversified metropolitan city of Bangkok.

Embracing these challenges the Urban Research Plaza together with our Journal of Urban Culture Research extend our heartfelt congratulations to our cherished Alma Mater, The Pillar of our Kingdom.



Figure 3. Mother of pearl inlay work and the top of a gong at the end of the traditional Thai gong circle known as *Khong Wong Yai* at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts – A. Kinear.