

Reality and Rhetoric of Changes in Thailand's University Admission Policy, 1999-2017

Nitchapat Kitcharern

ABSTRACT

This research aims to study a significant phenomenon, the changes in Thailand's University Admission system between 1999 and 2017. During this period, the admission system was changed seven times. This research focuses on the political factors that led to the changes in admission policy, particularly the relationships among politicians, bureaucracy, schools, civil society, and students.

The purpose of this research is threefold: (1) to understand the causes and procedures of changes in Thailand's university admission policy; (2) to study and understand the correlation between politics and changes in university admission system; and (3) to understand the impact of changes on students.

The research findings indicated that in the process of Thailand's University Admission policy formation from 1999 – 2017, the Council of the University Presidents of Thailand was the dominant policy maker. Bureaucracy, the political and social sectors had a minimal role in the policy making process. The Council of the University Presidents of Thailand has consistently monopolized the admission system. The Council is a group of executives from elite universities in Thailand. Moreover, changes in the university admission policy also affected educational opportunities. Every change in the admission policy leads to the education system more complex. Although the complex system affects every student, the middle class and elite students are able to deal with the process easier than the lower-middle class students with added socio-economic costs. The university admission system in Thailand is another example of social exclusion. The education policy should create more opportunities and options for young people, however the university admission policy in Thailand has constructed a system that helps elite universities equalize the number of students due to the oversupply of seats in universities.

KEYWORDS: Thailand's University Admission System, Education Policy, Inequality in Education, Policy Elite.

Nitchapat Kitcharern is a graduate student in Faculty of Political Science, at Chulalongkorn University. E-mail: <Knitchapat13@gmail.com>.

Between 1999 and 2017, the format of Thailand's university admission system was changed seven times. Each change lasted, on average, three years. The number of changes, the length of use per system, and several complaints from society clearly show that there are several questions regarding Thailand's university admission policies and society.

The main question is "why does the University Admission Policy change frequently?" It is interesting to study such issue in depth. The studies of higher education in Thailand are usually about quality assessment in higher education and curriculum development. However, the single-handedly research monograph that directly related to the policy used to recruit students into the university, which is the moment that connects the education system between high school and higher education, is still very rare. Problems in admission policies have accumulated over the years.

Table 1
Timeline of Changes in Thai's University Admission System

Year of Change	Examination System	
1961	Single examination system	12 years
1973 Entrance system	Single examination system (Choose 1-4 faculties)	26 years
1999 Entrance System	two-time examination system (Choose the best score) + 10% of GPA	7 years
2006 Entrance System	O-Net Score and A-Net Score (Depend on each university) + 20% of GPA	4 years
2010 Admission System	O-Net Score 30% (Every university) + 20% of GPA + GAT and PAT Score 2010 four rounds a year 2011 three rounds a year 2012 two rounds a year + the seven common subject exam (Clearing House System)	3 years
2013 Admission System	O-Net Score 30% (Every university) + 20% of GPA GAT and PAT Score (two rounds a year) the seven-common subject exam (Clearing House System)	2 years
2015 Admission System	The seven-common subject exam (Clearing House System) Change to nine common subjects exam	2 years
2017 TCAS System	Five rounds of central admission system	3 years

Note: Information from www.dek-d.com/admission

From 1999 to 2017, there were six main types of university admission systems with a minor modification every year such as the selection standard and scoring proportion. Changes in the university admission policy affect many people each time across many sectors. Each year, the policy affects about 301 universities in Thailand, 100,000 students who participate in the admission system and about 3,000 Matthayom schools¹ (2016 Educational Statistics Report by Office of Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education of Thailand, 2016). This is not to mention parents, teachers, and tutorial schools.

Moreover, the changes in university admission policies make the examination subjects more complex. Additionally the number of exams is increased, as more complex subjects and examinations are required compared to the university admission system before 1999. For example, in the admission system during 1973 – 1999 (Entrance system), students can only take the examination one time per year and the examination comprised of 5-8 subjects. In the 2010 system, students could take the examination up to five times per year (1 time for O-NET and 4 times for GAT and PAT examination). In the 2017 admission system, students took a set of examinations that was broken down into 4 main parts, i.e. O-NET, GAT, PAT, and the Nine Commons (3-9 subjects).

The changes in the university admission policy also affect the opportunities of many students, especially the poor, because students have to pay for participating in each examination (both fees and travel expenses), the university application fee, and for tutorial school. The higher cost of admission for higher education may lead to a gap of opportunities for students.

This research aims to study the changes in Thailand's university admission policy between 1999 and 2017 on the following issues: (1) to understand the causes and procedures of changing Thailand's university admission policy and admission system; (2) to study and understand the correlation between politics and the changes in university admission systems; (3) to understand the impact of changes in the university admission policy on students; and (4) to study the efficiency and effectiveness of Thailand's university admission policy between 1999 – 2017.

The four main questions of this research are (1) Which political factors contributed to the change in university admission policy during the years 1999 - 2017?

1 Matthayom means the school in Thailand that provide the education between grade 7 to 12.

(2) What was the process of changing the university admission policy during 1999 – 2017? (3) Do the changes in Thailand’s university admission policy affect the educational opportunity of students? And if so, in what way? (4) Do the changes in Thailand’s university admission policy create efficiency and effectiveness?

This qualitative study utilized two methods: (1) document surveys from relevant writings such as research, research papers, dissertations, books, academic articles, newspapers, and information on the internet; and (2) direct interviews and a focus group. Data was primarily collected from those who are involved in the politics of changing university admission policies. There were about twenty interviewees, including two government officers in the Ministry of Education and Office of the Higher Education Commission who were involved in changing the policy each time; ten high school students from schools in Bangkok and schools in Kanchanaburi who were affected by the changed university admission policy; parents; a representative from the Parents-Youth Association of Thailand; an editor and website administrator from www.dek-d.com; two relevant government agencies, including former government officials who had worked at the National Institute of Educational Testing Service (NIETS); four university lecturers; and various other persons who are involved in Thailand’s university admission policy.

Bangkok and Kanchanaburi are the provinces that were selected for this study because these two provinces represent different socio-economic demographics. Kanchanaburi is in the western region of Thailand and is the third largest province. Thus, many schools in Kanchanaburi are located in remote areas and have difficulty accessing the admission system.

The term ‘political context’ refers to the interaction between changes in the university admission system, bureaucracy, changes in government, and the social sector.

The main theoretical frameworks used for this article are Kingdon’s framework for determining the agenda and the alternative for public policy formation (Kingdon, 2014). The framework is used to study the formation of agendas and key issues in the policymaking process. The policymaking process is a complex process by which policies are formed. Agenda setting, the development of alternatives, and identification of choices among those alternatives seem to be governed by different forces (Kingdon, 2014). The processes that lead to an effective policy should also provide opportunities to participate. The policymaking process must consist of mul-

multiple sectors including the prime minister, cabinet, government officers, social sector and people (Kingdon, 2014). Including multiple sectors can help to create and shape policies that benefit all. It can also reduce potential problems because the policy is linked to the people. An inappropriate policymaking process impacts the efficiency and stability of the policy. Improperly generated policies may result in poor policy performance and the policy will likely lack stability.

According to Kingdon, the key questions in the policymaking process are 'Why is the issue so important?' and 'Why does the issue attract the attention of people both inside and outside the government to take part in the process?' This framework focuses on the importance of the pre-decision making process.

Another important concept used in this article is the concept of 'Policy Elite' in the educational policy-borrowing process by Lao (Lao, 2013). Lao's work describes the important role of the elites in establishing higher education policy in Thailand, especially in the field of quality assessment.

Brief History of Changes in Thailand's University Admission Systems, 1961-2017

The system of selecting people to study in universities in Thailand before 1961 was a system in which each university created their entrance examination independently. In 1961, universities started to cooperate by creating a common admission system.

After the Ministry of University Affairs was founded in 1972, the first comprehensive, centralized university admission system ("Entrance System") was introduced in 1973. The Entrance System was the longest admission system. However, academics and students pointed out that this system caused many problems. For example, students paid less attention to class and more attention to tutorial school because the content of the Entrance examination did not correspond to the content of the class.

Under the framework of "Educational Opportunity Expansion," introduced by Thailand's Education Reform in 1999,² the Ministry of University Affairs and Coun-

² The reform of Thai education in the 1997 came after the strong demand of the government to improve the quality of education in line with social and global conditions. Educational reform during that time was divided into two periods (Anyarat, 2010). During the first period, the constitution of 1997 assigned the government to create the educational law, resulting in the Education Act 1999. The purpose was to improve the curriculum and learning management, teacher development, and educational quality assessment, and to re-

cil of the University Presidents of Thailand worked together to introduce the new university admission system (the Admission). Students were given two chances to take the examinations each year. Students who took the examinations would know their scores before choosing faculties and universities, allowing students to estimate the probability that they could attend the chosen department. The major change in this university admission system was the use of 10% of high school record to apply to the university (Former director of The National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 17 April 2018). However, the claimed improvement of this system still brought new problems upon students, parents, and many schools. They explained that each school has a different GPA system, so the high school grade should not be used for university admission. However, this system was used continuously for seven years.

In 2001, the Council of the University Presidents of Thailand (CUPT) proposed a change in the admission policy to the Ministry of University Affairs. CUPT argued that 30% of the student's high school grades should be used in the new admission system. Additionally, they proposed that each university has the autonomy to have their own examination and qualification requirements, and that the O-NET (Ordinary National Educational Test) and A-NET (Advance National Educational Test) would be administered by the new National Institute of Educational Testing Service. This university admission model proposed by CUPT was unanimously approved to begin in 2006. This new university admission system is called "Admission" and is also known as the "O-NET / A-NET system".

The O-NET / A-NET system led to many new problems. Students complained about the number of examinations they had to take in one year, as O-NET required eight subjects and A-NET required five. The requirement to use 30% of a student's high school GPA created controversies regarding the credibility of each school's standards. The O-NET and A-NET system became unpopular. Students turned to the direct admission system of each university to increase their chance to gain admission even though this test cost more than the O-NET / A-NET system.

organize the structure of educational organizations. Next, there was a secondary education reform in 2011. One of the significant purposes of the secondary education reform was to improve and expand educational opportunities for people in all areas to have equal access to education. During this period, a policy providing 12 years of free education was lunched. It was found that the law was able to promote the expansion of educational opportunities. Both 12 years of free compulsory education and the student loan fund help students to stay longer in educational system (Athapol, 2017).

In 2009, CUPT announced a new university admission system, which was a modified version of the old one. The A-NET examination was abolished and in its place came the GAT and PAT system, administered by the National Institute of Educational Testing Service. GAT, or General Aptitude Test, is an examination divided into two subjects: Analytical test and English. PAT, or Professional Aptitude Test, is divided into 10 subjects. The admission score of each student is then comprised as follows: O-Net (30%), High School GPA (20%), GAT and PAT (as determined by each program).³ This system was used for university admissions in 2010 and allowed students to take the GAT and PAT four times per year.

However, in 2010 the Consortium of Thai Medical Schools organized an additional, specific test consisting of seven specialized subjects for those who want to apply to the Faculty of Medicine at each university in Thailand. This came about in response to the argument from the Consortium of Thai Medical Schools that the GAT and PAT system did not meet the requirement of the consortium (Former director of The National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 17 April 2018). GAT and PAT examinations were reduced to three times per year in 2011, and two times per year in 2012. In 2012, the CUPT introduced a new kind of examination called the Seven Common Course Examinations (Jed Wi Cha Sa Man – 7 subjects), administered by the National Institute of Educational Testing Service. The CUPT encouraged all university's direct admission systems to use the Seven Common Course score.

In 2013, a new admission system, Clearing House, was added into the existing admission system to reduce student's burden of applying through several direct admissions processes. The new Central Admission system had two rounds: the Clearing House and the regular admission. In the first round, students took and submitted the Seven Common Course Examinations score directly to each program they were applying for. If applicants were accepted in more than one program, the students were required to select only one. Those who could not get into the program would continue to the regular admission system.

In 2015, the CUPT expanded the Seven Common Subject Examinations into nine subjects (Nine Common Subject Examinations - Kao wi cha sa man). However, this examination became less popular among universities that offered the direct

3 For example the Department of Government of Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University Political Science Program required 50% from GAT and 0% PAT while the Department of Public Administration of Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University Political Science Program required 40% from GAT and 10% PAT.

admission process. University's direct admission and the quota system increased.

On June 1, 2017, CUPT proposed a new university admission system, the TCAS, or Thai University Central Admission System. The TCAS system consists of five rounds of applications. In the first round, students submit a portfolio. The second round is a quota application. In the third round, students are processed through a system similar to the old Clearing House. The fourth round is regular admissions, and the fifth round allows universities to admit any student autonomously.

The 2017 TCAS system still led to several problems. The tutorial schools are still popular due to the complex and competitive examination. Number of examinations for admissions increased, as well as the cost of examinations.

Table 2 TCAS System

First Round	Portfolio Rounds for students with special skill No written exam
Second Round	Quota System, i.e. quota for network schools, quota for students in the area etc. System with applicants required to submit scores from O-Net, Gat, Pat and probably other test that universities deem appropriate.
Third Round	Direct Admission System with applicants required to submit scores from O-Net, Gat, Pat and Nine common subject.
Fourth Round	Central Admission, a scores-based admission system. Required O-Net, Gat, Pat and high school GPA
Fifth Round	Direct Admission System offered by institutes that still have seats lefts. Each universities can create their own examination and selection criterion.

*Applicants who have already got a seat from a previous round will not be allowed a seat in a further round.

Note: Information from www.dek-d.com/admission.

From the above information, it can be seen that there are many problems in the Thailand university admission process. The interesting thing is that the problems that occurred in 1999 are still occurring now. In the process of changing the university admission policy between 1999 and 2017, it was found that the initiator

and dominant policy maker is the CUPT. It can be determined, then, that the CUPT is the main actor in the policymaking process. Although the National Institute of Educational Testing Service is another organization that worked together with CUPT to create the examination model and the examination content, the agenda itself was set by the CUPT.

The Process of Changing University Admission Policy and the Role of CUPT

Kingdon describes the policymaking process as comprising of four key steps: 1) choosing key issues that will lead to policy – these may be problems that are happening at the moment or a long succession, 2) narrowing down the issues to the extent required. In this process, there are always issues to be recruited and issues that are being dropped, 3) choosing one particular option among all the alternatives, and 4) putting the policy into practice (Kingdon, 2014). Kingdon believes that success in one step of the process is not as important as success of the whole. If only one or two steps succeed, this cannot guarantee the success of the whole process. In this article, the concept of policymaking was applied to study the process of changing the university admission policy. The research focuses on the first step in the process: selecting the key issues that lead to policy or policy formulation.

Kingdon explained that in the process of shaping policy, the agenda must be clearly defined. The agenda is a list of issues, or a single issue, that has been proposed by the government, officers, and other stakeholders. The stakeholders involved in this process are divided into two groups: the internal and the external groups. The internal group includes the Prime Minister or the Minister representing the leadership in the administration who will play a key role in shaping the policy and senior government officials that are of high rank in the administration. The external group consists of interest groups, political parties or political organizations, media, academics, and groups of public opinions (Kingdon, 2014). In the policymaking process, there is a gateway through which policy problems and issues from around the country flow. However, whether they can pass through is dependent on the decision of gatekeeper. As gatekeepers are very important, they should consist of various groups of people (Colebatch, 2002).

In the process of Thailand's university admission policy-making, the study found that since 1999 the most important actor in the process is CUPT. This organization monopolized the entire policymaking process. Before 1999, the cabinet, the Minister

of Education, and the Ministry of University Affairs and the Office of Education Council had full authority to make admission policies. Those groups and organizations are state agencies that are legally responsible for policymaking process.

One of the key rationales behind the new admission system is the notion of “autonomous university” which is the idea that the university should be autonomous from tight bureaucratic control. Despite the fact that the idea had been discussed since 1964, the actualization of the idea took place in the late 1980s amidst a change in the university administration. Since the late 1980s, public universities started to have more autonomy from government control, especially in terms of budget and administration. The new wave of globalization in the 1990s and the economic crisis in 1997 played key roles in increasing financial constraints on the universities, which were increasing the sizes and availability of programs in order to finance themselves with less support from the government.⁴

Despite the collaboration between CUPT and the Ministry of University Affairs in formulating the university admission policy in 1999, CUPT gradually gained more power and became the dominant policymaking power in 2003. The Ministry of University Affairs was changed into the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) with less administrative power. The function of the testing administration (testing service), which once belonged to the Ministry of University Affairs, was transferred to a new public organization, The National Institute of Educational Testing Service. The OHEC has no direct authority over The National Institute of Educational Testing Service (Onsang, Personal Interview, 2018). With the separation of policy administration and testing administration of the Ministry of University Affairs, CUPT gradually gained more influence in the university admission policy formulation.

At present, the authority to make changes in the university admission policy is under control of CUPT. This research found that changes in the university admission policy came from agreements among the representatives from the main members at the CUPT meetings at which the admission system is reviewed (Waraporn, Personal interview, 2018).

4 The concept of an autonomous university began most substantially in 1987 when the Ministry of University Affairs initiated the 15-Year Plan for Higher Education. One of the key issues was to develop higher education institutions that are independent, efficient, and able to achieve academic excellence on their own. They changed the structure to be a university under the supervision of government. Autonomy directly effects the university's management of their budget, leading some universities to increase the tuition fees.

CUPT proposes their decision to change the admission system to the Minister of Education. Then, CUPT announces the new admission system to the public by holding a press conference. CUPT coordinates with the National Institute of Educational Testing Service for test administration. The National Institute of Educational Testing Service only works on the contents of the test to serve the admission system that has been determined by CUPT in terms of the subjects required to apply for each program.

From an interview with an officer of the Office of Higher Education Commission, the reason why CUPT's decision to change university admission policy each time since 2003 has been accepted by the government agencies is based on the belief that CUPT's decision is founded on evidence and professional experience. Thus, the policy made by the CUPT is considered a reasonable policy that can be trusted. Another reason is that every university in Thailand has academic freedom and autonomous administrative power that the government should not interfere with. The government is only responsible for supervising and supporting them (Director Bureau of Policy Planning in Office of Higher Education Commission, 2 April 2018).

Aside from CUPT, the Minister of Education, other public organizations such as Office of Higher Education Commission and the social sector have a limited role in the policymaking process. People and the media were excluded from participating in CUPT meetings. Students, parents, and media were only invited to the public hearing session organized by CUPT in response to the problems that were raised with the admission system. After the hearing session, CUPT would decide among their members to revise or change the system. However, this is done without further consultation with or approval from those affected by policy. These findings did not correspond with Kingdon's idea of participatory policy formulation in which the policymaking process should consist of the people, media sector, and the group of people who are involved. The Thai case-study shows that although limited participation took place, the social sector still maintains a small role in policymaking.

CUPT is in fact neither a government agency nor a civil society organization. CUPT's dominant role in the formation of admission policy might be seen as a way to focus on the interests of its members rather than the general public. Also, CUPT's dominant role might go beyond its mission of providing general opinions and suggestions to the government, not a full packaged policy.⁵

5 The Agreement on CUPT in 1971 stated that there are three missions for CUPT to practice. First, CUPT was established to coordinate among universities in Thailand. Sec-

Policy Elites in the Changing of University Admission Policy

Lao argues that the early age of higher education in Thailand was intended to educate the ruling class on the new administration of the bureaucracy (Wyatt, 1969 as cited in Lao, 2013). This indicates that the higher education policy of Thailand originated from the elites in the country. From the past to the present, the elite in Thailand, such as high ranked officers, politicians, and academics, still express themselves clearly as influencers of policy decisions. Thai elites attempt to involve themselves with domestic policy in various ways. Typically, the way they create policy is based on Western knowledge. The educational policy is also one of their products. The role of the Policy Elite in policymaking has been discussed by many academics. The Policy Elite refers to policy influencers who have positions in the government or in departments that are involved in policymaking processes. The Policy Elite is influential, has the power to make policy decisions, and takes responsibility for the policies that they have created. The Policy Elite is usually composed of cabinets, government officers, and legal organizations. The form and characteristics of the Policy Elite in each country might be different. In some countries they may not be represented by only one group, but can be many groups of people that push policy in various ways (Lao, 2013).

When talking about elite in Thailand, such persons are linked to every sector and level of the country in various ways, including at the policy level. The elite is an influential group who support or oppose policy. The question of this article is, if we prove in the beginning that the changes in Thailand's university admission policy was caused by CUPT, which is the influential sector in this policymaking process, and who are the people that play an important role in the meetings that create the admission policy?

The research found that the policy elite in Thailand's university admission policy process is the group of elite universities that are members of CUPT. CUPT is an organization that coordinates the cooperation between the participating universities, officially formed in 1972. Currently, there are 34 universities as its primary members. Member universities have to pay 40,000 baht per annum (From the official website of CUPT; retrieved from <<http://www.cupt.net>>). CUPT acquired legal status as the

ond, CUPT must be a connector between universities in Thailand and the government. And third, CUPT is an organization that suggests policy and provides broad opinions regarding the shared interests of the universities (From the official website of the CUPT).

Association of Council of the University Presidents of Thailand as there is a legal requirement to do so if fees are collected from the members.

It must be emphasized that CUPT does not include all universities in Thailand as their members. However, non-members of CUPT can participate in decisions by providing input, but only upon CUPT's invitation. Non-members have typically accepted the decision of CUPT and have participated in the admission system since 2003.⁶

The research found that in spite of their limited role in admission policy formulation, most CUPT non-members (Rajabhat, Ratchamangala, and private universities) accepted the university admission policy actively created by the main members of CUPT. They also participate in every round of the admission process to recruit students into their universities (Onsang, Personal Interview, 2018). It seems as though the Rajabhat and Rajamangala universities have the option not to comply with CUPT admission policy, but it is clear that the choice is very limited. The reason why they had participated seems to be that they want to be included into the system of admission. In other word, this aims to attract students into their universities even when they are not the first preference.

The case of university admission policy in Thailand also complies with the theory of top down policymaking proposed by Dye (2001). The theory states that most public policy in the United States is driven by the political sector rather than public offerings. The elite are also the groups that influence things and drive the main policies of the country in a way that maintains their power, further passing elite power on to the following generations (Dye, 2001).

University admission policy in Thailand is an example of a tool utilized by the elite to maintain their influence and power in the country. A small number of universities in Thailand are reputed to be the top universities in the country.⁷ Getting

6 There are four "groups" or "tiers" of the university in Thailand. The first group is the elite group who are the main members of the CUPT. They represent the famous national universities. The second group is the group of Rajabhat Universities which was developed from a teacher/ community college. The third group is a group of Ratchamangala University of Technology, developed from a technical/community college. The fourth group is a group of private universities (News editor and website administrator of www.dek-d.com, 28 May 2018)..

7 Not all large and rich universities are considered elite universities. The two largest universities in Thailand are Ramkhamhaeng University and Sukhothai Thammathirat University. They are open universities, while several rich universities are private universities.

into such universities has become a high value marker in Thai society. This kind of university is the university that produces famous people including politicians, academics, high-ranking officers, medical officers, and celebrities who are highly respected in society. This type of university attracts many people and requires a top-ranking score from both the old Entrance system and the new Admission system. That is a reason that admission to this type of university is very competitive. The 2017 TCAS admission system record (first round) shows that there were 79,493 applicants to apply for the 34,993 seats offered from the CUPT main members and famous universities. On the other hand, there were 47,854 applicants to apply for the available 63,305 seats in the Rajabhat university system (Sathiti TCAS Robteenaung Kanrabdauy Portfolio – [First round of TCAS's statistic: Portfolio], 2018).

The top universities can also choose highly qualified high school students to enter the university. These youth are key in maintaining top universities' leading status. These famous universities are the ones that hold primary membership in CUPT as admissions policymakers. It can be concluded that these elite universities have created the format and the rules for admission to meet the needs of their own universities. The number of examinations and rounds of admission provides the top universities with more opportunities to recruit and find talented students. The more rounds of university admissions, the more chances for elite universities to gain students. Thus, Thailand's university admission policy is a filter designed by the policy elite and in favor of the elite universities' demands.

The examination timelines are another way to give the elite universities more opportunities to recruit talented students as the university admission timeline is based on the top universities' schedule. Some universities, such as Rajabhat and Ratchamongkol, have different semester systems and different timelines but they have to comply with the elite universities.

Lao's work regarding the logic of the Thai higher education sector on quality assessment policy explained that Thai education policy was originally established by the Thai elite, and has been borrowed from a successful education policy in Western countries (Lao 2015). However, Thailand's university admission policy is not simply a borrowed policy in terms of the direct import of a foreign model. Instead, it is a re-contextualization from a model that the elite consider as modern and successful even though the policy may not fit with the Thailand's reality and may create a more complex system with less success. Domestic factors, including the elite's preference

to maintain their status and power by limiting involvement from society and their complaints about the cost of admission to the poor, confirms that the re-contextualization of the admission policy does not help students to get to the top university. The university admission policymakers claim that most of the examinations, such as the O-NET and A-NET, are influenced by the O-level and A-level in England (Interview with Former Director of The National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2018). In fact, the substance of the tests does not seem to be compatible. In fact, the content of the test in Thailand has faced several critiques from students, parents, and the public.⁸

Over Supply in Thai Universities

Another problem that is occurring in Thailand's university admission system is the decreasing number of students who apply to universities. Between 2010 and 2017, the number of seats in universities is more than the number of applicants throughout the year. For example, in the year 2017, seats in the Central Admission System were 136,030, with only 81,232 candidates. (Sarubphonkankudlauekbuk-konkhaosuksator Nairadub Udomsuksa Admission2560- [Conclusion of university admission 2017], 2018). The reason for decline in the number of university students can be divided into two major causes.

First, the decline in fertility in Thailand is a leading cause in the decreased amount of university applicants. According to demographic statistics in Thailand, the incidence and number of children in Thailand is continuously decreasing. The number of children under 15 years old between 2005 to 2035 will be reduced from 14 million (23% of the total population) to 9 million (14%). The rapid decline in the number of young people will result in a steadily decreasing number of school-age children (ages 6-21) from 16 million in 2005 to 11 million in 2035 (Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University). When the population of school children decreases, the number of people entering higher education is declining in the same way. The number of students is decreasing, yet the universities continue to open new faculties and new programs. This is why in the past

8 The UK admission system has no central admission system, unlike Thailand. Instead the UCAS, University and College Admission System, is organized by a charity organization that coordinates students to apply for university, and students can also apply directly to each university in the traditional manner (From UCAS official website).

seven years there are enough seats in the university system for everyone to apply.

The shift in global educational trends also contributes to oversupply in Thai university. In the United States over the past ten years, 500 universities have closed down and it is projected that in the next 15 years, more than half of the 4,000 universities will experience financial problems (Hess, 2017).

Since 1990, most universities in Thailand have been privatized. That means they are free to manage themselves in every way, including finances and budgeting. When fewer students are enrolled, the universities need to adjust themselves more as the lower number of students affects the financial condition of the university. Many universities have come up with new marketing plan by opening special programs to attract more students. Those special programs usually cost more than the normal program in the university.⁹

Another factor contributing to oversupply in the university system in Thailand is the state funds in terms of student loan provision: the student loan fund (Kor Yor Sor). The loans are administered by a government agency under the supervision of the Minister of Finance. The purpose is to support and create more opportunities in education by providing loans for students in various ways. Eligible students are those who lack funds and who study in the fields that are essential and necessary for the development of the country. This fund covers fees up to the university level, and repayment begins after graduation. This loan program resulted in the expansion of educational opportunities at the university level and has allowed many students to enter the university system who may not have had access before.

Due to the oversupply problem at universities in Thailand, universities need to enroll a large number of students each year in order to maintain the university's economic condition. This may lead to more complex systems of admission examinations every year by adding more rounds of examinations, adding more subjects, or adding more examination fields. The policymakers claim that the different examinations facilitate various results to match the diversity of the available study programs and give students more opportunities to enter the university. Compared to the old Entrance system in 1973 – 1998, a one-time selection process leaves many people out of the university system who may then enter a private university or must wait

⁹ For example, the tuition fees in regular programs at Kasetsart University (Bangkhen) are 12,000-17,000 baht, but a special program can cost up to 40,000 baht (From Official Website of Kasetsart University).

another year to retake the test. The current system of selection to the university with several rounds seems like it provides more opportunity to the students. In fact, an extension of the university admissions system becomes a big and powerful rhetoric. The real reason is that the university admission system is a way for many universities to accommodate all of the students who want to apply for an elite university. This provides students with many chances to receive admission to CUPT member universities, rather than turning to private universities or alternative educational systems.

University Admission System and Educational Opportunity

The study of changes in Thailand's university admission policy found that such policy in Thailand is not only related to the elite universities, but also affects social class.

There have been several reasons for changes in Thailand's university admission policy each year from 1999 to 2017. But one of the most popular reasons used to support the change is to create more equal educational opportunities for students in Thailand. According to the announcement of CUPT, the main problems of the university admission system in Thailand from the past to the present are still the same problems: high cost of university admission examinations, importance of tutorial schools, etc.

Furthermore, a policy may set out to solve one problem but on the other hand may cause a different problem. For example, the policy of using students' high school GPA for university admission set out to solve the problem that students do not pay attention in high school classes. However, many students claim that using the high school score is unfair because each school might have different standards.¹⁰ The CUPT has responded to students by claiming that every school in Thailand is closely monitored by the Ministry of Education. Thus, the GPA from each school is of the same standard and they are generally acceptable (Former director of The National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 17 April 2018). In fact, this issue reflects the problem of disparity in quality of Thai education, especially among several schools.

10 At the beginning of the admission policy, there were students in Traim Udom high school and other schools in Bangkok that claimed the inequality. The students gave the reason that their school is a high standard school. Many subjects and content of studies are different from other schools in the rural areas (Interview with a former director of The National Institute of Educational Testing Service, 2018).

The university admission policy not only exacerbates disparity in the quality of education, but also the inequality of opportunity. The policymakers always state that the changes in university admissions are created to solve the problem of unequal opportunity. In reality, the changes in university admission policy have created more gaps in the equality of educational opportunity. Thailand's university admission systems affect the educational opportunity in several ways, for example, the changes affect poor students, both in the city and in the rural area, more than students in middle class families. The prices that a student has to pay to access the admission process include examination fees, admission application fees, portfolio, tutorial schools, and the traveling cost to the examination center and tutorial schools.

By accident or not, the university admission systems have shown that they provide even more opportunities to the people who have money. Conversely, the systems actually reduce the opportunities for the poor. Every change in university admission policy in Thailand has inevitably increased the burden on parents and students. An obvious example is the increased cost of participating in examinations, as students must pay for each exam regardless of whether the number of exams has increased. On the most popular education website among the high school students, www.Dek-D.com, there are a lot of posts and questions about how students and parents spend money on the university admission systems.¹¹

Interviews revealed an interesting trend that many students spend money to confirm their seat in several programs they were accepted before they decide whether they will attend or not.

11 Many people spend money on admission examinations, both in the central admission and the other round, not less than 5,000 to 10,000 baht. In the central admission system, students will be required to take GAT, PAT, O-NET and the Kao vi cha sa man examination. GAT and PAT examinations cost 140 Baht per subject. For PAT, student can take a maximum of seven examinations. For the nine commons examination, the cost is 100 Baht per examination. Students can take nine maximum subjects. Students will be required to pay about 140 - 2,820 Baht per person. And it is not only the cost of the examination that they have to pay; there are also many other things that incur costs, for instance, the cost of tutoring and special classes outside school. The tutorial school is in high demanded because some subjects that are used in admission examination are specific subjects not taught at school. Students need to learn the lesson by themselves or go to the tutorial school, which is more expensive but also more effective.

In the latest version of admission policy, TCAS was made to reduce the cost of the admission system. In reality, however, those problems still remain. In order to apply for the first round of TCAS, students must submit their portfolio, which can be sent to several universities. The application fee for each university is up to 600 baht, not to mention the money that students spend on creating the portfolio and the cost of shipping. In this system, it was found that middle-class students apply to many universities and their parents are willing to pay (Onsang, Personal Interview, 2018).

From the above issues, it can be seen that the discourse of educational opportunity is just a theory created by one group without taking into account the reality. Students who want to enter the university will do anything necessary and grab every opportunity that is available to them. In this case, those who are not affected, or who are only slightly affected, are typically students from the middle class and the elite. Parents of these middle-class students do not lose as much in this process as the poor. Although money may not be used directly to buy seats for their children in university, money can buy more opportunities through the ability to pay for more application fees.

One of the arguments of CUPT to legitimize their university admission policy is the number of seats that is available. The president says that “our policy has an objective to provide more chance to all students and we have enough seats for everyone who want to study in the university” (The secretary of CUPT, 11 June 2018). However, the idea of enough seats for everyone can be interpreted to include seats at small universities in the rural areas, like Rajabhat Universities, which are less popular and less competitive.

Although rural students can go to a university near their home and graduate equally like other people, those students may face the trap of social exclusion after they graduate from those small institutions. For example, many jobs require staff who have graduated from top universities. The organizations use the university's

An interview with a university medical student about her experience before getting into medical school revealed that she had taken about seven examinations including GAT, PAT, Kao vi cha sa man, and Consortium of Thai Medical School examination, in addition to traveling around the country to take the examinations at many universities, such as Khon Kaen University. She paid about 15,000 baht to take these examinations in her last year of high school (Interview from a medical student, 2018).

reputation as one of the criteria for selecting people. The number of people graduating from those institutions has turned out to be an excess resource in the labor market. Education is an important way in which people can advance or maintain their social status. Educational opportunities that are “purchased” help the middle class and elites in Thailand to ensure the social status of their heirs is maintained via education. The lower classes have much more limited choices, making it difficult for them to promote their social status or make a difference in their life.

Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Policy

It is obviously that the university admission policy in Thailand is facing the challenge's lack of efficiency. The policies continue to create more problems and do not seem to solve the initial problems. Consider the effectiveness of the university admission policy from the policymakers' point of view: it is effective because it achieves the goal created by CUPT. The changes in university admission policy benefit the shared interest of the main members, but they do not solve the problems faced by students. Also, the changes in university admission policy are effective in terms of increasing the availability of university seats.

On the other hand, the university admission policy is ineffective in many other ways. It cannot solve the old problems, moreover the policy creates more new problems. Such problems include increased complexity of examination subjects; the role of and increased costs of the tutorial school; the increased stress and anxiety of students and parents; and the reduced educational opportunity for poor students.

Conclusion

Thailand's university admission policy formation between 1999 and 2017 has been dominated by the University Presidents of Thailand. According to the values of democracy, the policymaking process should prioritize the participation of a variety of groups of people, especially the group of people who are directly affected by the policy. Thailand's former university admission policies have failed and left many issues in society because the policymaking process lacked of the substantial participation. Since the university admission policy and its changes have a wide-reaching impact in society, the people who are involved and directly affected by the policy should decide the choice of policy. The study found that changes in the university admission policy also impacts the equality of educational opportunity.

Every change in admission policy makes the educational system more complex, and the cost to deal with such a complex system is increasingly putting onto the shoulders of students and their families. Although the university admission policy appears to create opportunities and options for the young generation, the reality is that it is a system created to help universities equalize the number of students that they desire to admit to each university due to its oversupply of available seats.

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