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The model for strategic drive of Thai higher education institutions toward world-class universities

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to propose a model to drive Thai higher education to a world-class level. The purposive sampling technique was applied to obtain 116 key informants from eight universities located in Bangkok and its vicinity for an in-depth interview. Based on five strategies conceptual framework by Fred R. David and the findings from an in-depth interview, the Delphi technique was carried out with a panel of 17 experts to discover an appropriated model to drive Thai universities to be world-class universities. The results revealed that the model consisted of five fundamental guidelines. Firstly, the guideline for the University administrator recruitment, succession strategy and action plans are suggested to include a board with world-class university specialists and the university executive board should have a global vision, high integrity, administrative competencies, world-class-university-oriented goals, and global academic leadership. In addition, their operation plans should satisfy valuable changes. Secondly, the resource allocation guideline is to create high-quality of interdisciplinary research, innovations for global benefits, communication systems, networks, new business models, and resource management. Thirdly, the work system determination guideline recommended creating the student potential development system, innovative research process, social benefits, administrative technological systems, communication and knowledge management, and high-quality human resource. Fourthly, the organizational structure design guideline pursued to indue the efficiency, flexibility, and streamline systems that can collaborate all relating sectors. Lastly, the organizational culture development guideline suggested to promote integrity, international mindset, work with diversity, with a focus on excellence and social benefits.

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Introduction

In the 21st century and under the globalization trend, Thailand is encountering more pressures and risks due to continuous changes in this globalization age. This situation has obliged Thai higher education institutions to urgently adapt themselves by adhering to the 1999 National Education Act with additional amendments in 2002 as a practical guideline in accordance with the 12th National Social and Economic Development Plan (2017–2021). The plan is the major national development plan with a focus on educational quality to drive higher education institutions to the international level. The institutions have to increase their competitive capabilities by defining their visions to become world-class universities (Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy and Office of Higher Education Commission, 2010).

Generally, the term 'World Class University' is often associated with four dimensions, including sufficient funding, research excellence (e.g. publications, awards), internationalization (research collaboration), and knowledge transfer (conferences or patents) (Irungu, Liu, Han, Bomer, & Wanjiru, 2020). Some also argued for additional attributes such as good governance, a pool of talents and adequate resources as key strategies leading to becoming a world class university (Altbach, & Salmi, 2011). In 2020, universities ranked in the top 10 universities in Southeast Asia of the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings were in Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, and the top ten universities of the Times Higher Education (THE) were in China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea. It is seen that many Chinese universities have been able to attain world rankings (Huang, 2015). The South Korean government has a clear policy to raise their higher education institutions to world-class universities (Byun, Jon & Kim, 2013). For Thailand, there have been very few universities being ranked in the QS at the regional level, and at the global level, they still have far to go. There have been only three universities ranked in the Times Higher Education. Phuriparinya (2007) investigated success factors of world-class universities and found that the success depended on the quality of major missions of higher education. From literature review, it was revealed that Thai universities have started to become aware of an increase in their potential to become world-class universities among state-run universities with high potential. They have been investigating their current contexts and problems, factors, and future development guidelines as well as perspectives of academics that indicate important goals and roles. They are thus obliged to adapt or reform themselves in an attempt to enhance their potential and capabilities in all dimensions so as to accommodate more intense competitive situations. However, there have been no previous studies related to preparations of Thai universities to become world-class universities. This study focused on developing a model for strategic drives of Thai universities to become world-class universities based on the strategic management framework posited by Fred R. David. Additionally, recommendations about educational management of higher education institutions to become world-class universities after the COVID-19 pandemic are also included.

Literature Review

Thai universities have been included in the world-class universities ranking since 2010. According to the QS and THE rankings, it was revealed that there were no Thai universities being ranked in the top 100 from 2005 to 2015. For the top 400, only three universities were ranked, namely, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Mahidol University and Chulalongkorn University, respectively.

Driving Thai universities to world-class rankings requires strategic administration, which is regarded as a process involving all administrators of an organization to specify and implement in accordance with the organizational goals and strategies. For strategic administration and management, Thompson and Strickland, (2001); Robbins and Coulter (2007); Wheelen and Hunger (2000) mentioned about various but similar operational processes. The first step is to specify vision, which is to formulate a strategic vision, objectives and strategies of an organization. The second step is to analyze the environment, which is to inspect and analyze the internal and external environments by taking into consideration both internal and external factors that may and could affect the operations of an organization. The third step is to specify and formulate strategies, which is to designate directions, goals and operational procedures to achieve the goals. David (2009) proposed three steps of the strategic management process: strategy formulation, strategy implementation, and strategy evaluation.

This article aimed to investigate the administrative drive of Thai higher education institutions to become

world-class universities applying the conceptual framework posited by David (2009). The process of the administrative drive consists of five steps as follows.

1. The University administrator recruitment, succession strategy, and action plans. This is an acquisition of qualified executives for administrative positions in order to formulate policies, plans, and annual objectives.

2. Resource allocation. This is the allocation and management of monetary and non-monetary resources in order to motivate, reduce change-inducing resistance, and develop the potential of human resources.

3. Work system determination. This is the collaboration among agencies and related component groups by formulating operation steps and solving problems to enhance performance efficiency in order to achieve the goals.

4. Organizational structure design. This is the design to change, improve and merge work structures in accordance with strategies of the organization, and when compared with competitors, by taking into consideration criteria relating to performance outcomes.

5. Organizational culture development. This is a process of change and development of organizational culture in order for personnel to have values and behaviors that support operations to achieve strategic goals of an organization.

Thus, strategic management is viewed as a crucial tool for current organization management with an ever-changing environment and continuous impacts on organizational operations. Hence, strategic management is used to manage Thai higher education institutions for the above reasons.

Methodology

This study employed the qualitative method to investigate the process, problems and solutions, and to find out a suitable model to drive strategies of Thai universities in Bangkok and its vicinity onto world-class universities. Instrumental case studies were utilized to represent other case studies to uncover in-depth information so that questions, problems and theories could be realized and summarized (Berg, 2001). The methodology was divided according to the research objectives into two parts as follows.

1. To investigate the process, problems and solutions for strategic drive of Thai universities into world-class universities, eight universities in Bangkok and its vicinity were selected, including: (1) research-focused public universities (Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University); (2) public universities (King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok and King Mongkut's University of Technology Lat Krabang); (3) Rajabhat universities and Rajamangala universities (Sunandha Rajabhat University and Ratanakosin Rajamangala Technology University); and (4) private universities (Bangkok University and Assumption University). The selection criteria were based on (1) the visions or goals of the university in management to become world class universities, including the universities that were ranked by QS and THE during the last six years (2010–2015); and (2) its location was in Bangkok and vicinity. The purposive selection method was applied to select 116 key informants. They were divided into four groups: administrators (35), operational staff (29), lecturers (23), and students (29). In-depth interviews using a semi-structured question guideline were used to collect the data.

2. To find out a suitable model for the drive, the Delphi Technique (Macmillan, 1971) was employed with 17 experts in the fields of policy and planning, quality development, teaching and learning, research and academic services, internationalization, and knowledge implementation into community/society. The samples had to have had experience in each strategy for at least five years and were accepted in the academia. Moreover, they had to be able to fully distribute information to this study. For the Delphi Technique, a questionnaire was constructed through an analysis and synthesis of the in-depth interviews and literature review in an attempt to ensure that the instruments had content validity according to the measured variables. The questionnaire was then verified and validified by experts and twice revised before submitting it to the 17 experts.

Results

The research results from interviewing 116 participants in eight universities revealed the operational problems in driving their universities to world-class universities that included: (1) unclear goal determination; (2) budget limitation; (3) non-facilitating structures and regulations; and (4) sporadic and incongruent communication. The universities under the study strived to overcome the challenges and limitations through: (1) adjusting the structure, practical regulations, and streamlining; (2) increasing income generations from major missions; (3) strengthening budget management and resource

sharing; (4) developing system and integrating of instruction, research and academic services; and (5) increasing communication efficiency at all levels. As a result, to address the identified problems, this section discusses in details models and solutions derived from the research findings to help higher education institutions in adjusting their strategies towards a World Class University.

The Model for Strategic Drive of Thai Higher Education Institutions toward World-Class Universities

From applying the Delphi Technique with 17 experts, it was revealed that the suitable model consisted of components and mechanisms that could be systematically and concretely applied and planned for the drive as follows.

The university administrator recruitment, succession strategy, and action plans

1. Selected executives must possess a world-class vision, distinct values and exceptional capabilities. In the selection process, the selection committee members should consist of qualified individuals with expertise in managing universities toward world-class universities without bias and political interference. Internal and external stakeholders of the university should be provided an opportunity to participate in the selection process.

2. Operational strategies, plans, and guidelines for the drive should be clear with sub-plans at the operational level to implement principal university policies for concrete changes at all levels.

Resource allocation

1. Resource allocation must be applied to all processes. The goals are to create expertise and innovations as science leaders at the global level; to produce interdisciplinary research results with a wide range, high quality, practicality, commercial values, and indicative aspects to society at all levels; to seek and formulate inspirations, values and development of personnel potential; to develop information technology management systems; and to establish relationships and collaboration with all sectors in the forms of a strategic network and collaborative partnerships in the operation of all missions.

2. Clear guidelines in resource management and outputs should be used in all missions integratively by exploiting a strategic network process to enhance the potential in investment and resource management as well as systematic resource sharing in all sectors.

Work system determination

1. The ultimate results of the system determination are to support the competency development process of learners so that they could be in line with the needs of society and domestic and international labor market, as well as to reform the mindset, culture and practices in the instructional process, scope, program highlights and academic service systems with international efficiency; to support the entire research process; to promote excellent academic process in the fields of one's specialization by integrating and applying research and instructional expertise; and to create an efficient management system as well as to strengthen organizational culture with an emphasis on internal and external participation.

2. There should be a clear guideline in developing information technology management, enhancing the quality of performances in all missions, establishing relationships and collaboration with all sectors in the form of a strategic network, forming a collaborative partnership in conducting all missions, and developing a human resource management system to facilitate high quality human resource management.

Organizational structure design

1. The ultimate results of the organizational structure design are to enable all sectors related to the operations of all missions to have flexibility, speed, and support toward successes of the university with a reduction of redundant, non-success-oriented and awkward working steps; to create a working process that focuses on systematic participation, communication, integration and connection with all sectors within and outside the university.

2. There should be a clear and systematic organizational structure design with regular revision and a prompt changing process.

Organizational culture development

1. The ultimate results of developing organizational values and culture are composed of integrity, international mindset, diverse teamwork with an acceptance of different opinions and integrated work with networks, excellent and efficient performance, value addition and benefits for community, society and the public as well as environmental conservation, and adaptation to and awareness on changes at all times.

2. There should be concrete practical guidelines, such as ethical standard specification for lecturers, researchers and professionals, or honorable awards for outstanding personnel and students according to the university values.

From the five strategies to drive Thai universities to the global level, the suitable model was derived as shown in Figure 1.

This model shows that factor 4 is linked by organizational culture with regard to beliefs and a shared commitment to elevate their universities to world-class levels. The component below is the university's senior management team which consists of high-performing executives who will drive the change in accordance with the university's strategic plan that must be fixed in becoming "world-class university". All sectors must have an action plan that creates a tangible change. The three factors above are resource management, work system, and organizational structure, which must be designed to maximize the overall efficiency of the university.

Discussion

The analysis results for strategic drive of Thai higher education institutions toward world-class universities and the drive guidelines to close occurring gaps are as follows.

Goal Formulation

The formulation of the goals toward world-class universities is crucial, however, it was found to be different among four groups. The research-oriented autonomous universities designate clear goals, plans and guidelines toward leading global universities according to the QS and THE

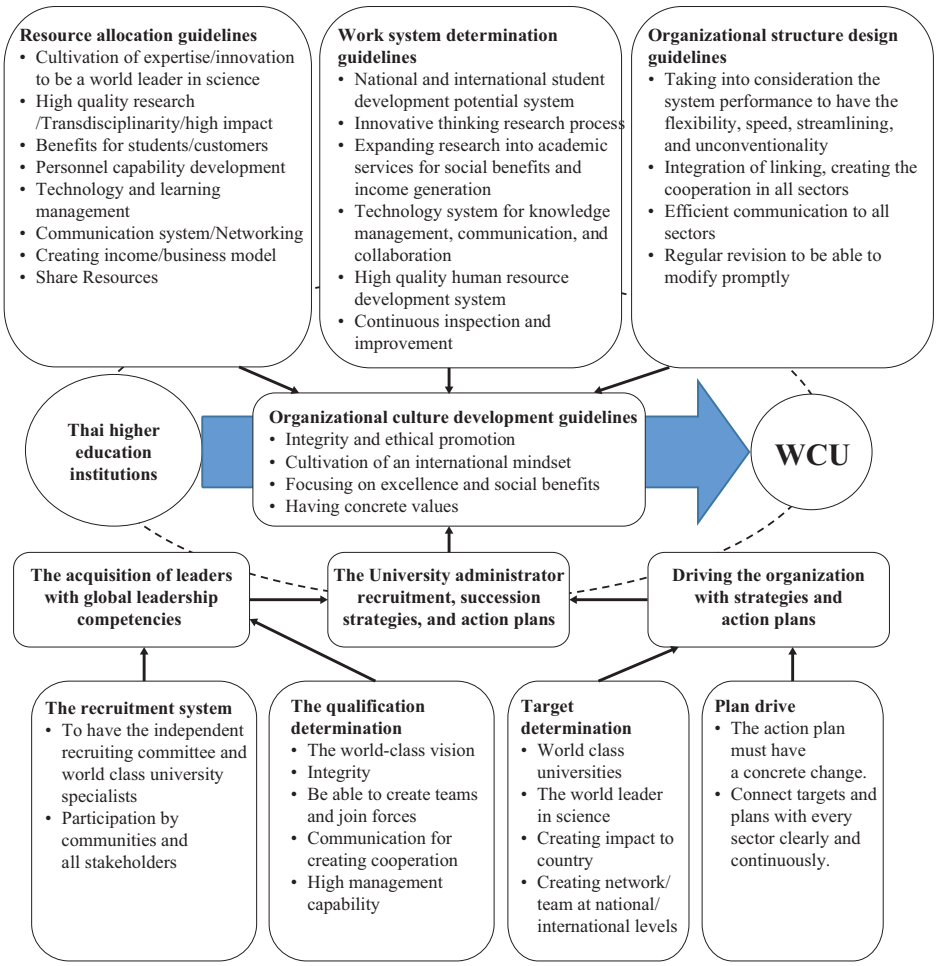


Figure 1 The drive model towards world class universities of Thai higher education institutions

rankings. Their focus is on developing organizational culture toward global learning organizations and improving the international mindset of faculty and students. On the other hand, the other three groups of universities aimed for the regional and international levels. However, some had not had an international mindset and attempted to cultivate the values and bonds to their faculty and students via activities. The findings are in line with those of Chou and Chan (2016) and Salmi (2013), proposing that universities must put an importance on talents and internationalization of lecturers, researchers, and students. It is thus imperative to first change their goals and directions toward world-class universities. Byun, Jon, and Kim (2013) and Huang (2015); pointed out that governments must seriously push and have clear and on-going policies on the drive to raise university quality to the global level.

Budget Allocation

Both governmental and private universities have encountered the problem of budget limitation, obliging them to internationalize their program quality, research, and academic services in an attempt to create a competitive advantage, as well as to survive in a highly competitive environment. Mohrman (2013) viewed that universities with relatively high potential to become world-class universities would have a strong budgetary support, research grants, and better academic development. The proposed model suggested that in order to generate more income, the universities should support and motivate the drive of major missions that are in line with those of Chitsuthaphakorn (2004), Phuriparinya (2007), Reddy, Xie, and Tang (2016), and Salmi (2013), indicating that the university should provide the atmosphere and environment that facilitate learning, working, and advanced research. Ahmed (2015) proposed that there should be budget allocation to increase competitiveness in learning and teaching, research and academic services. Additionally, Nguyen (2016) supported that a long-term plan should be used for human resource development from laying out a motivation reward system to selecting indicators for success evaluation in support of the university goals. Furthermore, the emphasis should be on personnel development and learning opportunities for students (Chaeddhananan, 2020).

Structures

It was found that most structures are in accordance with executives' policies, university strategies, and national agenda with a focus on collaborative work intended to achieve university goals. It was revealed that the three types of universities have had a bureaucratic administrative structure with less flexibility. This is in line with Parakhina, Godina, Boris, and Ushvitsky (2016), mentioning that a major problem was that capability creation of the university in assigning and authorizing administrative work was still not clear. Another important issue is that the bureaucratic system is less flexible. Samarnsin (2015) proposed that there should be some changes of bureaucracy-based university structures. Nonetheless, it was found that some universities have started to implement administrative structures of world-class universities as their model by streamlining job-related procedures and changing or revising rules and regulations that do not facilitate university transactions. The one-stop-service model has been practiced to meet diverse needs of learners, service users, community, and society.

Communication

Communication of administrators in each level is incongruent and does not cover all sectors. This is a principal obstacle in driving a university onto a desirable direction. That is, incongruent communication to transfer indicators into practice through administrators of different levels may result in errors in applying policies to all sectors. It was further found that communication did not cover students in various faculties in all groups of universities, except research-oriented autonomous universities and private universities. Moreover, some universities did not have efficient communication channels to motivate their personnel to understand and be aware of the importance of their operations. This is in line with Waal (2011), suggesting that the operation for university development requires the translation of strategies into practice from the central policies to practices at agencies with the monitoring of plan assessment on a regular basis and adequate communication within the organization. If the operation could not be improved, it would become an important impeding factor to mobilize faculty support to drive the universities into world-class rankings. It was further found that research-oriented autonomous universities have attempted to develop their organizational culture to become a global learning organization as well as to cultivate the international mindset in their personnel and students. This is in line with Chou and Chan (2016), Salmi (2013), indicating that the university must recognize talents and

internationalization of lecturers, researchers, and students. The other three groups of universities have focused on the international level, but some have not had the international mindset so they have cultivated their values and bonds through various activities among their personnel and students.

The prototype model presented is a model that is suitable for all 4 groups of universities. If aiming to be a world-class university, each mission must be driven according to the model as follows:

1. Research-focused public universities focus on: (1) creating international programs or bilingual programs (Thai/English) that cater to an international community; and (2) creating large-scale, cross-disciplinary and high-quality research in order to raise research results to meet an international level and continue to lead to innovation.

2. Non-research-focused public universities focus on: (1) quality system development and outcome base by providing more active learning; and (2) research in the production of knowledgeable people in science and technology with sufficient support to create large-scale research and cross-disciplinary integration.

3. Rajabhat universities and Rajamangala universities focus on: (1) enhancing language proficiency for personnel and students to be part of the ASEAN and international communities; and (2) developing innovation and research through networking.

4. Private universities focus on: (1) teaching more international programs that emphasize the development of teachers' potential in languages and fields that are lacking; and (2) increasing motivation to produce academic works and obtain patents.

In terms of budget support, it was found that all groups needed the same support, especially private university groups. In addition, creating an international mindset for staff and students of all groups was also needed.

However, it can be concluded that when driving a university to a world-class level, it is important to define clear goals for: (1) World class universities; (2) The world leader in science; (3) Creating impact to country; and (4) Creating networks and teams at national and international levels and resource allocation through building expertise and innovation to become a world-class science leader and produce research that integrates across disciplines and developing technology and information management system to support work processes in all missions to be of higher quality and devise a business model to convert capital and productivity into commercial income and change the way of thinking to an international mindset.

Conclusion and Recommendation

From analyzing the research results and interview suggestions to derive the overall data about raising Thai higher education institutions to world-class universities after the COVID-19 pandemic, the results are summarized as follows.

At the policy level, the government must specify goals and plans to select Thai higher education institutions to drive them toward world-class universities, support them with necessary resources and revise as well as improve the monitoring systems and mechanisms by applying the technological system.

At the implementation level, universities must revise their directions, goals, and policies; develop their communication potential; allocate adequate budgets to support all missions for the drive toward world-class university rankings in the post-pandemic period; create an operation system to seriously support the targets and connect all sectors and missions; revise and improve their administrative structures to facilitate the drive, e.g., cooperative education to facilitate coordination, collaboration and counselling between faculties/ departments and the industrial sector, or income generation in the form of company or juristic person; and emphasize the cultivation of international mindset and awareness on entrepreneurship, as well as the spirit of teachership, which is a very important Thai value and cultural aspect that metaphorically compares a teacher as a caregiver to his/her students without expecting any personal benefits from them.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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