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Meeting Challenges of the Education Reform Era**

Prasert Suttiprasit, Ph.D.

Associate Professor/ Senior QA Specialist and the Academic Senate Member

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University
Chaeng Watana Road, Pakkred, Nonthaburi 11120
THAILAND

Tel: +(661) 4569056 Fax: +(662) 6163233

Email: heasspra@stou.ac.th burtmail02@yahoo.com

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Prasert Suttiprasit, Ph.D.

*Associate Professor/ Senior QA Specialist and the Academic Senate Member
Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand*

ABSTRACT

With the wind of global change, it is generally accepted that the today global society is propelled by an economy indisputably driven by knowledge, information and technology. That is why education is an essential mainstay for the society's infrastructure. Thailand's Education Act 1999, the first Thailand's Education Act that became effective since the 20th of August 1999, has opened up the reform era of Thailand's education system in which all Thai citizens, of all age groups, all social and economic statuses, the underprivileged and people with special talent, would receive an appropriate education as well as relevant skills, training and development. In order to ensure the improvement of educational quality and standards at all levels, the Education Act requires that the systems of internal as well as external quality assurance shall be comprised.

In fact, the terms quality and standards, particularly in higher education sector, have been mentioned more and more for a decade. The number of universities and other higher education institutions in Thailand, both of public and private, including the ones from Western countries, are now growing very fast. From the past, Thai higher education institutions have never established quality assurance system. The credit of each institution depends on the believes of the society perceived from the image of each institution.

To install the effective internal quality assurance system, Thai higher education institutions have to develop their own quality assurance system. The quality management system of each institution has to be upgraded in order to facilitate and control the quality system approach to meet the required standards. The Ministry of University Affairs (MUA) announced the nine aspects of academic

standards for each higher education institutions to identify the quality indicators and criteria.

Up to now, it was figured out that most of Thailand's public higher education institutions developed their quality assurance system based on the principles of "Input-Process-Output" model of the institutional teaching and learning system. Each institution makes use of the MUA guidelines of the nine academic standards leading to the identification and control of the quality performance indicators. However, some public higher education institutions have developed the quality assurance systems identified in their own name, e.g. Chulalongkorn University (CU-QA84), Thammasat University (TU4Es) and Sri Nakharinwirot University (SUPREME 2000). On the other hands, the international quality management system standards were adopted and applied at the institutional level in a number of Thai higher education institutions such as Saint Louis's Nursing College, Durakijbundit University, Saint John's University and Rajamakala Institute of Technology. The international quality management system standards were also adopted and applied at the faculty or departmental level in some higher education institutions.

Whether the institutions develop their own quality assurance system or adopt the international standards, the key point is that the institutional quality assurance system has to be "established - documented - implemented - maintained and continually improved." In order to assure the efficiency of the institutional quality assurance system, the mechanism for controlling and auditing have to be carried out. In addition, the quality of each higher education institution shall be externally assessed once for the five year-period based on the external quality assessment standards for higher education recently announced by the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA).

In this paper, the systems and mechanism of quality assurance in Thai higher education institutions were discussed. The key points are focused on how an institutional quality assurance system accomplishes the mechanism for controlling, auditing and assessing the quality of each higher education institution. Besides, the details and case studies regarding how the quality and standards of Thai higher education institutions becoming recognized both at the national as well as the international are analyzed and discussed.

Introduction

Due to the worldwide accessibility of informational and technological sources, everybody has the equal chance to learn more regarding the other's standards of living as easy as they can stand up and open their eyes to see what going on around themselves. Consequence, the terms "quality and standards" are being more mentioned, perhaps in education sector particularly for higher education. As the number of universities and other higher education institutions in Thailand, both of public and private, including the ones from Western countries, are now growing very fast; there is a big question for the Thai Society to answer. The question is "Whether the quality and standards of the graduates from all institutions are acceptable or not?"

In fact the quality of educational development and academic excellence were emphasized in the past National Economic and Social Development Plan (the 8th plan: 1997-2001). "*Asiaweek*" the Asian well known journal, has annually ranked the universities in Asia and Pacific since 1997. The somewhat negative image of Thai higher education institutions comparing to the other institutions in Asia and Pacific in the idea of *Asiaweek* has been argued around the country. Calls for the implementation of quality management system with the internationalizing higher education standards thus came from various sources.

Thailand's Education Reform VS Quality and Standards

Due to the first education reform in Thailand a hundred years ago, the school-based education system started. From there, the "chalk and talk" pattern of teaching, wrote learning, and teachers as the center of teaching-learning process had been established. Hence, Thailand's education was somewhat restrained only in the classroom (Kaewdang, 2001).

Not until the year 1999, the National Education Act 1999 was promulgated in agreement with the Constitution of the Kingdom 1997. The Act, the first Education Act of the country, is expected by all concerned to bring the appropriation of education reform for a better Thailand. According to the Act, all Thai citizens, of all age groups, all social and economic statuses, the underprivileged, and people with special talents, would receive an appropriate education as well as relevant skills, training and development (*Rachakitjanubeksa*. 1999). To achieve this goal, the law requires that the state has to provide a qualitative basic education (up to

grade - 12) for all Thais as well as to promote a higher education along with a special education thoroughly, quantitatively and qualitatively (<http://thaiedreform.onec.go.th>).

The National Education Act 1999 comprises nine chapters. With the purpose to maintain and improve the academic standards of education, the educational quality and standards are included in the National Education Act 1999 part 6: Standards and Quality Assurance. The Act requires that the systems of internal as well as external quality assurance shall be comprised (*Rachakitjanubeksa*. 1999).

Quality and Standards: Implications for QA in Higher Education

Actually the term “quality” is not a static concept and that it should be responsive to change overtime. Measures of quality are themselves influenced by individual and group values. Bookman (cited in M.Abdullah, 2000) defined the terms quality and standards as: “the professional bodies would set the standards, while an institution’s quality would depend on how well their students succeeded in meeting them.” Yorke (1999) mentioned that the terms quality and standards were used rather loosely in UK and defined the two terms when applied in education as: “quality is taken to be the totality of attributes bearing on the student’s experience (the needs are not wholly those articulated by the student, and include those that might be anticipated for the student), whereas standards refers to the expectations set for the student’s program of study (and which therefore have a bearing on the quality of the student experience) as well as the levels of performance achieved by the student.”

Quality assurance (QA) in education is the concept of how to achieve the procedures of assuring both quality and standards. In practice the processes of establishment, documentation, implementation, maintain, and continual improvement shall be carried out continuously. The opinion regarding the institutional accreditation/certification particularly higher education institutions will be based on (1) the summation of quality of all study programs-offered and (2) the reputability of an institution (Yorke, 1999).

Lessons-learned from the Western

The accreditation system of higher education institutions and programs in the United State of America (U.S.) as well as the quality assurance system of higher

education institutions and programs in the United Kingdom (U.K.) are the two important model systems of the quality assurance of the world. Countries around the world apply these two systems into their country either using only one pattern directly or adapting or even integrating the two systems. Universities and colleges of higher education in the U.S. as well as in the U.K. are autonomous completely, self-governing institutions. In order to be national or even international recognized and to attract students, each institution is responsible for the quality and standards of its academic programs and awards. Besides, each has its own internal procedures for assuring and promoting the quality of its provision, and for satisfying itself that particular standards are obtained (Suttiprasit, 2002a).

Accreditation is the process of activities long nationwide accepted in the U.S. The U.S. accreditation of the higher education institutions is voluntarily sought by institutions or programs and is conferred by non-governmental bodies (Council on Higher Education Accreditation, 2002). The institutional accreditation bodies are national or regional in scope, and normally comprise the institutions that have established and maintain accreditation. On the other hand, the specialized bodies conducting the accreditation of program-preparing students for a professional work is usually associated with professional association in the area. All accrediting bodies are non-governmental agency. However, the U.S. Secretary of Education is required by the statute to publish a list of the U.S. nationally recognized accrediting agencies. The major purposes of accreditation are (1) to assure the quality and effectiveness of the institution and of program, and (2) to enhance the improvement of the institution or program (New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2002).

Comparing to the over three thousand universities and colleges in the U.S., United Kingdom (U.K.) comprises of over 180 universities and colleges. The quality assurance of the U.K. higher education institutions can be classified as “internal QA “and” “external QA.”

To conduct the internal QA, higher education institutions have procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of the programs. Monitoring takes in to account the reports from external examiners, staff and student feedback, reports from any professional body as well as the feedback from former students and their employers. Review is generally an institutional process, conducted periodically, typically every six years from now on (five years in the past) with the help of

external experts. This seeks for the validity of a program, aims and intended learning outcomes (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2002). Besides, institutions conduct the arrangements for the periodic review of various services they provide to students.

Each institution appoints external examiners, who are independent academic experts, normally from other institutions or from the areas of professional practice. The external examiners make judgment, to report on performance in relation to particular programs. The report is submitted to the head of institution. External examining may be undertaken as the primary safeguard of the U.K. higher education institution academic standards (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2002).

External Quality Assurance in U.K. higher education institutions provides that quality and standards within higher education institutions are being safeguarded and promoted. The current method of external quality assurance in UK is called “Academic Review.” Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was formed in 1997 in order to success the “institutional academic quality audit” role of HEQC as well as to success all HEFCs’ role for the “teaching quality assessment” at the subject level done in the past. However, the accreditation by the professional and statutory bodies still continue to be carried on for the purpose of granting licenses, but using under of the evidence from the reviews of QAA.

The Integrated method of review that focus on the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of quality and academic standards of higher education institutions both at the institutional and subject levels has been used in Scotland since October 2000 and across the whole of U.K. by January 2002. This method of external quality assurance, i.e. the “Academic Review” in which operates over a six-year cycle, with each institution and all subject are being reviewed once in each cycle (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2002).

Thai Higher Education Institution QA System

According to the National Education Act 1999 part 6: Standards and Quality Assurance, the systems of internal as well as external quality assurance shall be comprised as stated earlier. Internal quality assurance is the processes of assessment and monitoring of quality and standards of the education from within which are carried out by personnel of the institutions-concerned or by parent bodies with

jurisdiction over these institutions. On the other hand, external quality assurance is the processes of assessment and monitoring of quality and standards of the education from outside which are carried out by the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment or by persons of external agencies certified by the Office (Ministry of University Affairs, 2002).

The Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) is the national public agency set up in accordance with the Education Act 1999 in order to carry out the external quality assurance at all levels. ONESQA has already announced the external quality assessment standards for basic education (up to grade –12) as well as for higher education. The standards for higher education comprises 8 aspects as the followings (Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment, 2002):

1. The standards for graduates quality
2. The standards for learning process
3. The standards for learning facilities
4. The standards for management
5. The standards for research and services
6. The standards for academic service to community
7. The standards for preservation of art and culture
8. The standards for internal quality assurance

Implementing Internal QA of Thai Higher Education Institutions

Prior to the establishment of ONESQA, the MUA had announced the MUA quality assurance policy along with the guidelines for implementing the QA system in higher education institutions. According to the guidelines for implementing the QA system, i.e. internal QA of MUA, there are three steps to accomplish as the followings (Ministry of University Affairs, 2002):

1. Control stage – to install the quality management system (QMS) for controlling the institutional quality and standards in delivering education in order to meet the standards set for.
2. Audit stage – to measure and monitor the QMS purposing to make sure that the institutional quality and standards are met.

3. Assessment stage – to assess and compare the internal QA with the key performance indicators (KPI) in order to maintain and improve QMS. Thus the institutional output quality and standards set for shall be met.

During the control state, every higher education institution has to develop and install their own QMS, i.e. the institutional management system to facilitate the quality assurance system. The focus is on the process that the students undertakes as well as the learning output, i.e. what students should be able to do when they have completed the education process (Suttiprasit, 2000b).

Most of Thailand’s public higher education institutions developed their QMS, i.e. internal QA system based on the principles of “Input-Process-Output” model including the core processes of higher education institutions as shown in Fig.1. Many higher institutions makes use of the MUA guidelines of the nine academic standards leading to the identification and controls of the quality performance indicators without naming their QMS. The others have developed the quality assurance systems identified in their own name, e.g. Chulalongkorn University (CU-QA84), Thammasat University (TU4Es) and Sri Nakharinwirot University (SUPREME 2000) (Suttiprasit, 2002b). There are somewhat differences among higher education institution QA systems particularly the format as well as the details of documentation system and control processes.

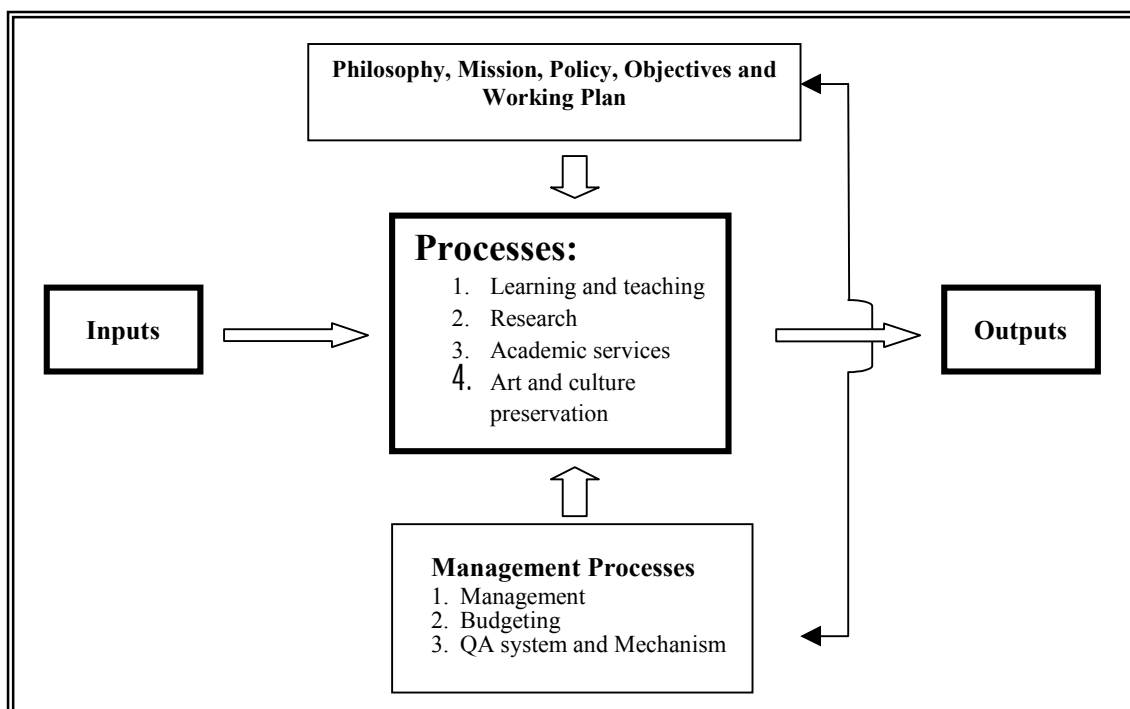


Fig.1 Core Processes of Thai Higher Education Institutions

In addition, the international standards of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) were adopted and applied at the institutional level in a number of Thai higher education institutions such as Saint Louis's Nursing College, Durakijbundit University, Saint John's University and Rajamakala Institute of Technology. The international quality management system standards were also adopted and applied at the faculty or departmental level in some higher education institutions. In any event, the international standards provides only requirements and guidelines, the institutions have to define the operation and control processes to fit with the institutions' context themselves (Suttiprasit, 2002b).

Concluding Remarks

Entering the 21st century, Thailand has opened up the era of educational reform resulting from the first National Education Act 1999. It is nationwide expected that this should bring the appropriation of education reform to a better Thailand, i.e. a better society. In order to accomplish this challenge, it is necessary that all the appropriate forms of education provided, particularly for higher education, have to be extremely aware of quality and standards. It has to be focused on how an institutional quality assurance system accomplishes the mechanism for controlling, auditing and assessing the QMS of each higher education institution.

Even though there are different ways to set up the effective QMS, the implementation results should be the same if the institutions make clear that the QA system is really implemented and absolutely effective. It will be meaningless if the institutions have only a very complete and good documentation system without the implementation of the "control, audit and continual improvement." With the correct understanding of how to develop the practicable QMS for their own internal QA or to adopt the framework of the international standards to fit with the context of the institutions; the institutional internal QA should meet the standards set for, either of the ONESQA or of other international standards. To cope this issue, the careful process of the selecting/ setting KPI for the institution must also be carried on. Besides, the benchmarkings should be undertaken to keep the institutional QA improve continually.

It is wished that the effective internal QA as well as external QA of higher educations would absolutely be a part of the keys factors in effective implementation in the higher education reform of Thailand.

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