

# Institutional Research in Thailand: From Past to Present

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## Development of Institutional Research at the University Level

Thailand introduced institutional research for the operation and improvement of universities for the first time around 1970-1975. The impetus that triggered the utilisation of institutional research came from two significant movements of that time. The first one was the movement to bring more autonomy and academic freedom to the universities in Thailand which were under the bureaucratic system. This desire required the universities to work together to find out the suitable system for them, and later the Thai government in 1970 approved in principle that if any university council considers its university ready for the status change to be out of the bureaucratic system, that university can undertake the change to become a 'public autonomous university'. The second movement was the need for the University Development Plan which was a part of the National Economic and Social Development Plan. This demand forced all the eleven universities back then in Thailand to turn their serious attention to their development plans so that the plans would be in accordance with the National Economic and Social Development Plan, and necessary preparations would be in place to facilitate the change of the status.

Given such impetus, Thai universities became enthusiastic to experiment with new approaches to support their operation in order to respond to these two pressing movements. One of the important tools that these universities used was 'Institutional Research'. In that period of time, two issues that the universities expected to take place for their decision making towards administration and planning for development were Management Information System (MIS) and Internal Efficiency, aiming for maximum effectiveness of all aspects of their missions.

As for the first issue, institutional research was employed to gather and analyse basic data about the students, faculty, study programmes, buildings and facilities, as well as financial resources. The synthesis of such raw data yields a set of regular information for the MIS, and thus has to be conducted routinely for the university to have constant and up-to-date information. This ready-to-use information is critical for the university's decision making in the matter of administration and planning for development. At the beginning, the majority of the information was obtained from inside the university. Later, the information related to the university's education provision from external sources such as the country's demographic and economic data are included in the synthesis, too.

The second issue, Internal Efficiency, which is related to the effectiveness of all the missions of a university, takes into consideration the input, the process, and the output, to indicate whether the education it provides is effective or not and to measure the quality of the products of that education, i.e. the graduates. To answer these questions, the university must conduct a special kind of research called 'Operational Research', or invariably termed 'Action Research', to investigate its own institution and later use the findings of the investigation to improve its internal operation for optimum effectiveness and efficiency. This type of research, therefore, became to be known as 'Institutional Research' both in Thailand and around the world. The common issues that require institutional research consist of both 1) regular matters of the university such as its graduates' employment rate and their employers' satisfaction and 2) specific and ad hoc matters that the university is currently facing and in need of an answer to.

During this early period of the utilisation of institutional research in Thailand, it was the time for the rapid social and economic development of the country. Higher education was one among a wide range of areas that required fast improvement, and institutional research was used to bring about the expected improvement. Hence, institutional research began in the universities existing in that

period of time, such as Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University, and Kasetsart University, before it was extended to be undertaken nationwide.

### **Development of Institutional Research at the National Level**

When the Thai higher education system started to employ institutional research as a tool for university administration, the key policy body that oversaw, coordinated, and promoted the affairs of the universities was the Office of University Affairs, a government unit having the status of a ministry. All the 11 universities in Thailand at that time were under the supervision of this Ministry. In 1975, the Ministry of University Affairs focused its attention on institutional research by developing the national system in the form of 'National Network of Institutional Research' for Higher Education. This network was coordinated by the Ministry itself and delegated key work to the 11 universities in order to achieve two important tasks, namely; 1) to create a shared pool of higher education information and an individual set of information for each university for the MIS and 2) to carry out institutional research both regular and ad hoc ones to serve a particular purpose of the Ministry and the member universities. At this stage, institutional research was deemed as an essential and significant tool for the planning of the university's development and for the development of the higher education services both at the institutional and national level.

During the years 1985 to 1990, the Ministry of University Affairs had a policy to formulate the 15-year Higher Education Development Plan as a framework and guideline for the provision of higher education to be in line with the changes and the new and emerging needs of the country and the world community at that time. For this monumental task, the Ministry appointed a national committee consisting of distinguished members from the universities and other related bodies to be in charge of the formulation of the plan. A serious problem at the beginning of this task was that the data and information gained from the MIS and the institutional

research studies in the country were not adequate for this long-term national plan which demanded the information that could offer an accurate projection of the different scenarios related to higher education in the coming 15 years. That information inadequacy called for an in-depth ‘future studies’ or ‘trend studies’, so the Ministry commissioned various agencies in the universities to conduct a series of institutional research studies using the ‘Environmental Scanning’ method.

The issues seriously in need of the research findings to substantiate the Higher Education Development Plan formulation included the country’s population structure, manpower demand, economic development, as well as social, political, and environmental changes. All of these were environment factors that potentially affected the situations in Thai higher education then and in the future. The formulation of this 15-year Higher Education Development Plan took almost 2 years to finish and the impactful result was the first long-range Higher Education Development Plan of the country covering the period from 1990-2004. This coordinated effort served as a valuable experience for those involved in the formulation of the plan to learn how to employ the Environmental Scanning method. The plan, rightly entitled ‘The Thai Higher Education towards the Challenging Future’, provided Thailand with the long-term trends and guidelines for the provision of higher education, which was firmly rooted in the core principles of Higher Education Equity, Quality, Internationalisation, and Privatisation and Private Participation.

In the year 1990, the Thai Government endorsed the establishment of the first Public Autonomous University in Thailand, which is Suranaree University of Technology (SUT). The SUT establishment team made use of the information gathered for formulation of the Higher Education Development Plan as essential information for the establishment of this first public autonomous university and later for the transformation of other universities from under the bureaucratic system to become autonomous. This mission stimulated these universities to turn their due

attention to institutional research, and started to set up an institutional research unit in their universities as a crucial part of their planning and administration.

The role and the importance of institutional research were heightened to another level when the Thai Government undertook the significant National Education Reform during the years 1997-1999. The National Education Council, the main responsible body of the reform, employed institutional research to collect necessary information to create a database useful for the systematic and all-inclusive national education reform. Findings from the institutional research was proved highly beneficial, enabling the reform to progress smoothly with evidence-based information which is crucial for all the decision making. At last, Thailand was equipped with the national blue print that sets the frame and direction for the national education reform. That blue print is Thailand's National Education Act 1999, which is still in use until these days.

### **The Present and the Future of Institutional Research**

Since the start of the national education reform in 1999, educational institutions of all kinds and at all levels are required to implement educational quality assurance, both the internal one annually and the external one by the Office of National Education Standards and Quality Assurance (ONESQA) at least once every 5 years. The results of this QA are used to adjust and improve the educational quality of each institution. Institutional research once again serves as a tool to create a database of information that supports both the internal and external quality assurance.

At present, institutional research is gaining more and more significant roles in the educational management and administration, be it teaching and learning, decision making, policy setting, planning, and assuring the quality, both at the institutional level and the national level beyond the scope of the institutional

context where institutional research was originated. Although institutional research has been well recognised and its benefits highly acknowledged in the Thai education for the past 50 years, improvement of institutional research to arrive at its maximum benefits is still very much needed. The support for the institutional research improvement is derived from stronger resources at the institution in terms of empowerment of institutional research personnel and development of indispensable resources especially the digital technology for the creation of institutional research information database.

Currently, one focal point of attention from the government and higher education institutions that affects production of graduates in this country is Cooperative and Work Integrated Education (CWIE). This approach of education asks for the combined effort between the institutions and the work places to enrich the quality of graduates by placing the final-year students to work as full-time employees at workplaces for a minimum period of 4 months under the supervision of both the job mentors and university lecturers and giving them at least 6 credits for this placement. For this CWIE to succeed and continue sustainably, it is vital to have a CWIE database collecting information from both the institutions and work places and to conduct evaluative assessment in order to develop a set of indicators of the effectiveness of CWIE and the extent of the effectiveness. All of this is for the development of CWIE in the future.

In conclusion, Thailand has been continuously harnessing the values and advantages of institutional research for more than half a century. In the new age in which we all are right now, policy determination and decision making are based on evidence, and the interpretation, analysis, synthesis, communication, and storage of data and information are made possible with better ease, thanks to the advancement of technology, especially the digital technology. Definitely, institutional research is here to stay, and stay strong as well.