Leading Educational Change in Thailand: Implementing National Public Policy in a Multi-Campus University System

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This paper explores issues associated with the leadership of educational change as a response to national public policy in Thailand. The public policy emphases leading to the change and the change processes pursued by university leaders are examined through the lens of teleological theory. Focusing on the transition of Prince of Songkla University from a teaching to a research university, the study utilizes qualitative methodologies to analyze the leadership of educational change within three sectors of the Thai government: Prince of Songkla University, the Thai Senate, and the Thailand Research Fund (the Thai government funding branch for higher education).

INTRODUCTION

Expanding interaction between nations and the accompanying de-emphasis on borders and barriers are facilitating the growth of worldwide economic competition. This process, defined by Von Bogdandy (2004) as economic globalization, impacts all nations and fuels escalating emphases on securing economic advantage. The foci of the competition are evidenced in national efforts to maximize human capital, innovation, information technology, and entrepreneurship. Because each focus is knowledge intense, the driving force behind economic globalization is viewed by many as the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge (Chen & Dahlman, 2005; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). The emerging global economy is often thus labeled the knowledge economy, at the center of which is higher education. Considered pivotal to the creation and transmission of knowledge, higher education is increasingly deemed by government policy makers across the globe as critical to national economic development.

BACKGROUND

This perspective on the importance of higher education—particularly with regard to the essential roles played by research universities—underscores public policy developments in recent years within the government of Thailand. The importance of research to national development was first realized by the Anan Punyarachun government. In 1991 Prime Minister Anan's cabinet created a national board to investigate the status of research conducted in Thailand, with the intent of harnessing beneficial research results for economic development (The Thailand Research Fund, n.d.). The vision of using research as a mechanism for national development was reinforced during two subsequent economic crises.

The first economic crisis, known as the Tom-Yam Kung Crisis, occurred in 1997 and revealed significant problems within the Thai educational system. Policy makers realized the need to reform the quality not only of teaching and learning processes but also administration of the educational system (Fry, 2002). Addressing problems such as an overemphasis on learning through rote memorization, and inequities and inefficiencies within the educational system, were seen as necessary for strengthening the overall competitiveness of the country. As a result, the National Education Act B.E. (1999)—commonly known as the National Education Reform—was passed to promote long-term improvement of all levels of Thai education. The primary intent was to better prepare Thai citizens and corporations for global competition. The act envisioned higher education as the key instrument for national development and the driving force that would empower Thailand to benefit from innovation and increased competitiveness (Office of the Education Council of Thailand, 2003). In addition, the research capability of higher education was coupled to national manpower production. Higher education institutions accordingly became more focused on increasing the number of researchers within their purview. The reform of national educational structures and systems, launched by the National Education Act B.E., has continued since 1999 with reinforcement both through subsequent legislation and policies such as the Ministry of Education's Regulatory Act of 2003.

The second economic crisis, referred to as the Hamburger Crisis, began in 2008 and originated in the United States. The crisis severely damaged the Thai economy, with impacts including a 60% decline in the export sector, a 2% to 3 % decrease in gross domestic product (GDP), and a significant reduction of investment capital available to entrepreneurs (Kongprasert, n.d.). Attempting to anticipate future global economics, the Thai government decided to invest in projects that would strengthen national competitiveness (Yuthamanop, P., February 19, 2011). Foremost among these was research capacity. A study presented by the Commission of Higher Education (CHE) highlighted the correlation between national economic competitiveness and research capability (Dee-ake-nam-kul, 2009). Data within the study demonstrated the connection between the rankings of individual country GDP and rankings related to research productivity and patent output. In addition, the data revealed that the majority of research productivity connected to economic competiveness was produced by universities rather than non-university entities. The evidence convinced the government of the linkage between research productivity and economic competiveness. Strengthening higher education within Thailand became a national public policy priority, and universities were targeted as the main engine to drive research output for national development.

In 2009 the Thai government, led by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejchachiva, launched a campaign to promote National Research Universities under the national economic stimulus package Thai Khem-Khang 2012 (Dee-ake-nam-kul, 2009). The campaign invested the equivalent of 30 million USD in the development of select National Research Universities and 10 million USD in the promotion of research activities within higher education. The targeted benefits from the National Research Universities were: increased research productivity, an accelerated number of high quality scholarly publications, establishment of the foundations for world-class universities, innovations that will enhance national economic development, and the bolstering of Thailand's competitiveness within the global economy.

One of the nine institutions selected by the Thai government in 2009 to become a National Research University, Prince of Songkla University (PSU), is the subject of this study. With five campuses located in southern Thailand, the historic mission of the university centered on teaching. In 1999—prior to the actions of the government in 2003 and 2009—PSU began moving in the direction of research orientation by seeking to strengthen the university's graduate programs. Selection by the Thai government as a National Research University, and the accompanying funding from the government in the amount of 500 million baht [Thai currency], formalized the new direction for the university and the transition from a teaching orientation to a research orientation.

This study was conducted in early 2010, just a few months after the selection of PSU as a National Research University. The purpose of the study was to explore the leadership of change associated with the university's transition from an historic teaching emphasis to an emerging research emphasis. Through interviews and document analysis, relevant sectors of the Thai government were accordingly

incorporated, including the university itself, the Thai Senate, and the Thailand Research Fund (the Thai government funding branch for higher education).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employed teleological theory to focus the research questions, methodology, and analysis of the findings. Teleological theory proffers that organizations are purposeful and adaptive. Consequently, organizational goals direct organizational development. These goals change or are modified, however, due to changes in external environments (Burke, 2011). In the context of this study, therefore, the assumptions were made that: (1) as an organization Prince of Songkla University is both purposeful and adaptive, (2) university leaders use organizational goals to guide the university, and (3) the environment beyond the university—namely, economic globalization and resulting national public policy—produces new or modified organizational goals.

METHOD

This is a qualitative research study that utilized both interviews and document analysis to assess the nature of leading educational change in Thailand in response to national public policy.

Sites

Interviews were conducted in early 2010 in the private offices of Prince of Songkla University leaders and Thai government officials, with the former occurring on the Hat Yai campus in Hat Yai, Thailand and the latter occurring in Bangkok, Thailand.

Participants

Criterion sampling was employed for the selection of potential participants; only individuals with critical knowledge of the institutional transition were invited to participate (Patton, 1990). All individuals invited to participate did so, resulting in nine senior executives affiliated either with the university or with the Thai government participating in the study. These leaders included: the President of PSU, the PSU Vice President for Alumni Affairs and Community Engagement, the PSU Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, the PSU Director of Change Management, the PSU Associate Dean for Planning and Development in the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, the Vice President for Alumni Affairs and Community Engagement within the Academic Research Division of the Thailand Research Fund, the Chairman of the Thailand Senate Subcommittee on Higher Education (within the Senate Education Committee), and two long-term PSU senior faculty members in separate faculties.

Procedure

Two research questions guided the study:
1. How are administrative and academic leaders at Prince of Songkla University leading the institutional transition from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on research?
2. What are the impacts of the transition on administration, faculty, and students?

This manuscript focuses exclusively on the first research question. A subsequent manuscript examines the second question.

A semi-structured protocol [see the Appendix] was used for all interviews, facilitating not only the use and order of identical questions for all participants but also flexibility with regard to follow-up or focusing questions. Interviews were audio recorded and audio recordings were transcribed. The researchers separately took field notes during and immediately after each interview. Two coders—one of the researchers and an independent coder—read all transcriptions and field notes, agreed upon tentative code definitions, evaluated the tentative definitions and constructed final codes, and independently coded the transcriptions and field notes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Emergent patterns and themes were

accordingly determined in the data. In addition to multiple interviews with senior executives, PSU documents and publications, as well as documents from the Thailand Research Fund, were analyzed.

FINDINGS

Four major themes emerged in the study. These included: (1) leader recognition of the external environment, (2) leader recognition of the internal environment, (3) emerging organizational goals, and (4) planned organizational strategies. In the following paragraphs we present these themes in the order of the frequency with which they occurred in the study.

Leader Recognition of the External Environment
First, Thai government and PSU leaders were extremely aware of economic globalization (particularly in Asia) and its impacts on both national competitiveness and higher education. Every participant framed their responses within the context of economic globalization. Even when the interview protocol utilized questions seemingly unconnected to the phenomenon participants frequently brought the conversation back to the subject. With uniformity the participants emphasized the connection between national competitiveness and university sponsored research. To the person they stressed that the external environment necessitates the transition among select Thai universities, including PSU, from teaching to research. They overwhelmingly embraced the vision of the Thai government and defined the external environment beyond the university as including global, regional (Asian), and Thai public policy perspectives. Collectively and individually they stressed their commitment to making PSU competitive as a research university not only within Thailand but also globally.

Leader Recognition of the Internal Environment
Second, concomitant to their recognition of the external environment driving the transition at PSU, the Thai leaders were aware of the environment within the university. In particular, the interviews revealed that PSU leaders were cognizant of internal resistance to the change. PSU leaders anticipated and received resistance, primarily from disciplines within the social sciences that traditionally focus on teaching. They were aware that the transition represented not only new and emerging internal political realities but also a shift in perceived disciplinary prestige, resources, and power. Consequently, they viewed the institutional transition as long-term, necessitating on-going support for all disciplines and departments. A forthcoming manuscript explores the nuances of the transition's impacts on PSU administration, faculty, and students.

Emerging Organizational Goals
The transition from a teaching to a research orientation represented new organizational goals developing at PSU. These goals coalesced around five emphases:
1. Increase PSU's global rankings
2. Increase research productivity and knowledge production
3. Increase faculty publication in international peer-reviewed journals
4. Increase the number of PSU faculty with Ph.D.s, and
5. Increase graduate student participation in research.

The interviews revealed unanimity between Thai government leaders and senior PSU administrators on each of the developing goals.

Planned Organizational Strategies
To achieve the emerging organizational goals the leaders—senior PSU administrators in particular—planned specific strategies. The strategies most frequently identified in the interviews and documents were:
1. Provide research training for faculty and graduate students

2. Provide institutional financial support for research
3. Utilize governmental financial support for research
4. Implement financial incentives for research productivity
5. Promote the transition through all available opportunities and venues (faculty/departmental meetings, institutional communications, etc.)
6. Promote research as part of a new organizational culture, and
7. Allow teaching-oriented disciplines to transition at a slower pace.

DISCUSSION

Given the proximity in time between the selection of the nine National Research Universities and when this study was conducted, it is not surprising that government and university leaders would be especially cognizant of the external environment, in particular, economic globalization. Simply put, it is logical to expect that economic globalization was fresh on the minds of those who participated in the study; after all, they were the leaders whose responsibilities necessitated such awareness and, who, in response, were in the process of implementing significant educational change.

When viewed through the lens of teleological theory though, the findings highlight multiple considerations worthy of discussion due to their notable consistency with the primary components of the theory and their relevance for the leadership of educational change. Although no evidence was presented by the participants that teleological theory was intentionally utilized for the transition, it appears that the leaders collectively and individually observed each component. We proffer, therefore, that the findings demonstrate the beneficence of teleological theory not only as a conceptual perspective for academic leadership but as a practitioner guide for leading change in higher education organizations.

The first component of teleological theory employed by the Thai leaders in this study relates to intentionality. Teleological theory suggests that organizations are intentional because they are purposeful and adaptive. The findings indicate that PSU was both due to the leadership of its senior administration. Comments made by the university president accentuate this consideration:

> Many universities are satisfied being a broker of education. A real university to me means that it must do more than distribute knowledge to its students. You may have the leading knowledge in science, technology, health science, social science, or the humanities. But this is only the starting point. We have to help our people search for more and more knowledge and to use this knowledge as a friend of the country, to strengthen and improve the country. The search for knowledge and its application is endless. This may be the main context for transforming the university from teaching to a more intensive research university.

These comments reveal definite organizational purpose: the university must generate, convey, and apply knowledge, and this is done not only for the benefit of students but for the country as a whole. The latter phrase highlights adaptability in that the president recognizes that the dissemination of knowledge will no longer adequately fulfill the purposes of the university; given the global knowledge economy the university must be involved in the application of knowledge for economic purposes. Comments such as those of the president were echoed by PSU and government leaders in each interview. They cumulatively suggest, in keeping with teleological theory, that those who lead or aspire to lead educational change must be intentional.

Goal utilization is the second component of teleological theory that the participants of this study used to lead educational change. The theory holds that organizational goals guide organizational development. Throughout the study it was apparent that this applied to PSU. Senior administrators relied on organizational goals (increase research productivity, faculty publications, the number of faculty with Ph.D.s, etc.) to direct organizational development. We observed two critical aspects of this component in the findings. First, PSU leaders collaborated to develop relevant organizational goals for the transition.

Prior to goals guiding organizations they must be established. We found that the leaders of PSU did this through collaboration and through thoughtful analysis of internal and external environments. Second, PSU's leaders implemented (or were in the process of implementing) each goal through strategic management. These aspects parallel the key theme of Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence's (1997) *Strategic Change in Colleges and Universities*, namely, that given the rapidly evolving external environments within which higher education organizations now operate, higher education leaders must not only employ strategic planning but consistently and permanently move beyond strategic *planning* to strategic *thinking* and strategic *management*. Such movement is an iterative process; we observed it pervasively at PSU.

Flexibility is the third primary component demonstrated by the participants. It reflects the provision within teleological theory that organizational goals are adjusted as the external environment evolves. The findings indicate that prior organizational goals—those based on PSU functioning as a teaching university—were modified due to recognition of change in external environments. These environments include the larger phenomenon of economic globalization and the concomitant public policy developments at the national level. University and government leaders identified change beyond PSU and were consequently leading the university in a new direction—toward research. In addition, they modified organizational goals in response to changes in the internal environment. Although they anticipated resistance to the transition they tweaked goals as resistance grew. They recognized that change could not be accomplished through fiat, and that permanent change necessitated the elapse of time and the evolution of organizational culture. The sixth and seventh planned strategies listed above—promote research as part of a new organizational culture and allow teaching-oriented disciplines to transition at a slower pace—are reflections of this flexibility.

These considerations correlate with the key holdings of teleological theory. This is noteworthy academically and conceptually. From a practical perspective though, they appear to position PSU well for emerging realities in Thailand, Asia, and beyond. Ultimately, they emphasize the critical role that individual leaders play not only in the implementation of public policy but the effectuation of educational change.

LIMITATIONS

The nature of this research study reflects limitations. First, substantive literature explores the role of higher education within the growing knowledge economy. Minimal literature, however, examines how higher education leaders facilitate the transition of their institutions from teaching to research emphases. This is particularly true for Thailand. Second, the study was conducted among participants from a single government and a single university, both of which were influencing, implementing, or responding to specific national public policy. Third, the study was conducted within a specific timeframe; it is likely that a similar study conducted at another time would yield different findings. These limitations indicate that generalizability is not possible.

CONCLUSION

We believe this study contributes in a small way to the knowledge of the leadership of educational change. Although the study reflects a single case study that produced findings that are neither generalizable nor comprehensive, the contribution is important given the context of the rapidly expanding global knowledge economy. For the foreseeable future an increasing number of universities are likely to be tapped by their governments for economic development purposes and asked to enhance research productivity; ongoing change will be the norm. This study highlights how one university is succeeding in such endeavors. Beyond research, therefore, the findings demonstrate relevance for practitioners—administrators and academics leading similar transitions. We believe their numbers will be myriad. The findings also expand the utility of teleological theory to universities transitioning from teaching to research. This study thus makes limited contributions to research, practice, and theory.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1. What is your position at Prince of Songkla University (PSU) [or within the government of Thailand]?

2. What incentives or motivations are encouraging PSU to transition from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on research?

3. What external factors or forces, if any, play a role in this situation?

4. What steps or actions has PSU taken so far to become a research university?

5. What steps or actions do you anticipate will be taken in the future?

6. What was PSU like before the transition began?

7. How will PSU be different in the future?

8. What has the environment at PSU been like during the transition?

9. Who are the primary leaders in this change?

10. What do you see as the impact thus far on administration? On faculty? On students?

11. What do you think will be the long-term impacts on administration? On faculty? On students?

12. Has there been any resistance to the change?

13. If resistance has occurred, how would you describe the resistance?

14. What steps were taken to address resistance?

15. What do you see as the primary benefits of the transition?

16. What do you see as the primary disadvantages of the transition?

17. Has anything surprised you about the transition process?

18. Is there anything else that you would like to add or you think we should know about the transition at PSU?