



Quality Movement: Challenges or Constraints on Thailand's Education

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Abstract

Quality assurance and institutional transformation seem to be two dominant themes currently capturing wide attention of both public and private university communities in Thailand. Although these concepts have been brought into the discussion limelight several times in the past, never before that the coming wind of change would have been strongly felt as now. Significant movements especially from leading universities and the Ministry in charge have become noticeably intense and explicitly geared toward the restructuring or the dismantling of public university status to become autonomous educational entities. Questions and concerns arose pertaining to the profound changes such transformation movement shall bring. Will it be a healthy challenge or the dreadful constraints foreseen in the course of Thailand's higher education development?

The call for improvement holds that the transformation of public higher education institutions to be autonomous as the subsidized government enterprises is the sufficient claim of effectiveness. The author posited that university transformation can not be viewed as a sole response to scarce government resources but is contingent upon empowering universities to demonstrate excellence and accountability, meaning that the restructuring efforts must reflect the strong pursuits of both internal and external efficiency. In this light, higher education institutions are to demonstrate excellence in all of their endeavors to deliver the qualified pool of educated citizenry who can function successfully as both the manpower and manhood in the society where they belong.

In all, this paper reflects the author's personal concerns and views on contingent factors ensuring the smooth transition into the next millennium. The paper depicted current scenario as well as trends and forces affecting and shaping Thailand's higher education. Basic discussion was also brought up on the justification of the transformation initiatives as well as the impacts of these changes. The roles of and links between higher education and business



was examined to provide further discussion on the future direction and goal of Thailand's higher education under the notions of academic excellence and the emerging themes of relevance and responsiveness to imminent needs of the nation. Three conceptual models were formulated to reflect the holistic view of higher education's system encompassing the interrelationship of universities and industries as the producers of relevant knowledge, the proposed key attributes of graduates as functional citizenry, and the strategic framework of Thailand's higher education administration to realize the desirable goals.



บทคัดย่อ

การจัดการศึกษาที่ต้องสนองต่อความต้องการของทั้งตลาดงานและเพื่อบรรลุคุณภาพความเป็นเลิศ เป็นประเด็นที่ทวีความสำคัญมากยิ่งขึ้น และส่งผลให้ผู้เกี่ยวข้องกับการบริหารจัดการศึกษาต้องพิจารณา ให้ถ่องแท้ถึงปัจจัยที่มีผลกระทบต่อคุณภาพการศึกษา ท่ามกลางกระแสการเปลี่ยนแปลงของรูปแบบสถาบัน การศึกษาไปเป็นหน่วยงานในกำกับของรัฐ บทความวิจัยนี้มุ่งศึกษาปัจจัยที่พึงพิจารณาในบริบทอุดมศึกษา ประกอบด้วย การพิจารณาสถานการณ์แวดล้อมที่เกี่ยวข้อง แนวโน้มการจัดการศึกษา การนำเสนอรูปแบบ การจัดการศึกษาในลักษณะความร่วมมือระหว่างภาคเอกชนที่เป็นผู้ใช้บัณฑิต คุณสมบัตินักศึกษาในอนาคต และแผนกลยุทธ์ในการจัดการศึกษาเพื่อให้บรรลุสภาวะที่พึงประสงค์ดังกล่าว



Mapping the situation: What's going on now?

There are three kinds of maps needed to help organizations learn for action. The first is a map of where the organization is; the second is a map of where it wishes to go; the third is a map of how to get there from here... Chris Argyris & Donald A. Schon, p.160.

The downturn of Thailand's economy signaled an urgent message for university policy makers and administrators that it is time for renewal and reevaluation of the university mission and functions. During the period of social and economic transition, there is an increasing need to enhance the responsiveness of Thailand's higher educational system to meet the diverse needs of the nation. Educational goals, curriculum and offering programs are subject to critical revision to ensure the relevance of higher education. Most important of all, the future of higher education must be steered and governed under the notion of excellence encompassing both internal and external efficiency. Excellence in this regard is no longer a luxurious option or a fancy term often undermined by the sheer pragmatist. From now on, strengths of higher education institutions will be judged by their ability to adapt to the dynamic and complex environment.

The change efforts

In recent years, quality assurance and non-government status has noticeably become two familiar terms in Thailand's higher education. Particularly, in times of pressing needs to cope with the scarcity of resources and increasing public concern over the quality and employability of graduates, colleges and universities in Thailand are expected to demonstrate educational excellence and self-sufficiency as another important priority to institutional survival. It becomes apparent that Thailand's higher education is entering the renewal process of reevaluation and reform.

At the policy level, public university reform has been introduced as one of the ADB loan conditions stressing the needs to privatize public universities with minimal government subsidy. The hiring process of university staff and personnel seems to be the key target first affected by the government efforts to force existing public universities into the new system. For instance, the recent circulars from the Ministry of University Affairs spell clear that all new-



hires of public universities from now on will no longer have the “government official” status but will be employed under the term contract as the private corporate personnel. Along this line, the budget allotted for new hires has been put to a complete halt and awaited the redesign efforts to accommodate the non-government institution transition. Evidently, as this millenium is drawn to close, it is perhaps the dawning era of the new breed of higher education institution - - the private corporate status with public duties and functions. But how could and would this happen? Are there any mechanisms designed or enabling environment created to ensure smooth transformation?

Dismantling the status quo

The long history and culture of higher education had hindered the fact that they are vulnerable and susceptible to environmental pressures. The traditional governance of universities had been glorified under the prescribed academic freedom and autonomy. To a certain extent, university faculty has been well insulated in the ivory tower and was confident that they would always be in full control of their academic turf. Their vulnerability became apparent with the sudden movement to dismantle the governmental status of all public higher education institutions. The illusion of taking charge of public universities was seemingly drawn to a close when the government spelled clear that all public universities were subjected to become autonomous within the year 2003.

On the student front, higher education institutions are experiencing the decline in enrollment affected by the chronic economic slump and the increasing competition among universities. The founding concept of public university for all Thai people would be superseded by the need to increase profit margin for survival. It would be difficult for the institutions to resume their open door admission policy and provision of education opportunity and financial subsidy for the poor and the disadvantaged.



Trends, forces and strains

Higher education institutions, in their nature, are complex organizations. To a great extent, they have *multiple, vague, and ambiguous goals*. Unlike the business firms which exist to make a profit, while other government bureaus have clear tasks specified by law, such as public health, commerce, and industry, higher education institutions are engaging in diverse missions encompassing teaching, research, service to the local community, support of the arts, and solutions to social problems. They are expected to be all things to all stakeholders and even a panacea to all ills. Because their existing goals are unclear, they are receptive to or inescapable of accepting any new goals imposed upon them leading to the irony that higher education institutions are expected to do more with less under the euphemistic ‘restructuring’ wave.

Another foreseeable trend will be a fierce competition in the academic arena, particularly among former public universities and between former public universities and private institutions. Cost recovery and income generation will dominate the institutional management structure and culture. Within the same institution, competing interests among different schools and faculties will be inescapable when each has to protect their shares of limited wealth. What will happen in the long run to the schools offering “non-marketable” programs, such as those in basic and social sciences like mathematics, physics, philosophy, and humanities. Are they to be left out of the competitive arena?

Employability of the graduates is also critical. The sudden manpower freeze in a downsizing era directly seriously affected the outcomes of higher education. While measures and mechanisms in response to the crisis remain unclear, further questions arose as to the justification of the increasing numbers of new institutions established over the past few years. The answers to these questions are crucial to the new direction of higher education and to the assurance of quality and employability of the graduates.

Higher education institutions in the coming future will be operating in an emerging ethos of partnership and alliances putting an end to the unitary view of university as the sole producer and supplier of knowledge for the society. The phenomenon changes in technological breakthroughs coupled with the increasingly complex economic and social issues have altered the management of universities to become less of a self-contained activity. An effort to provide



relevant higher education has reemerged to dominate the scene and required effective interaction with a wide range of development partners across the social spectrum. Strengths of the universities will be critically judged upon their ability to share and mobilize resources they do not necessarily and fully own. Key attributes of effective higher education will, therefore, be viewed on its ability to address on diversity and complexity of social and economic issues. The requisite characteristics of the universities in the future, their functions and desirable outcomes will be explored in the next section.

The road ahead: New characteristics of higher education institutions

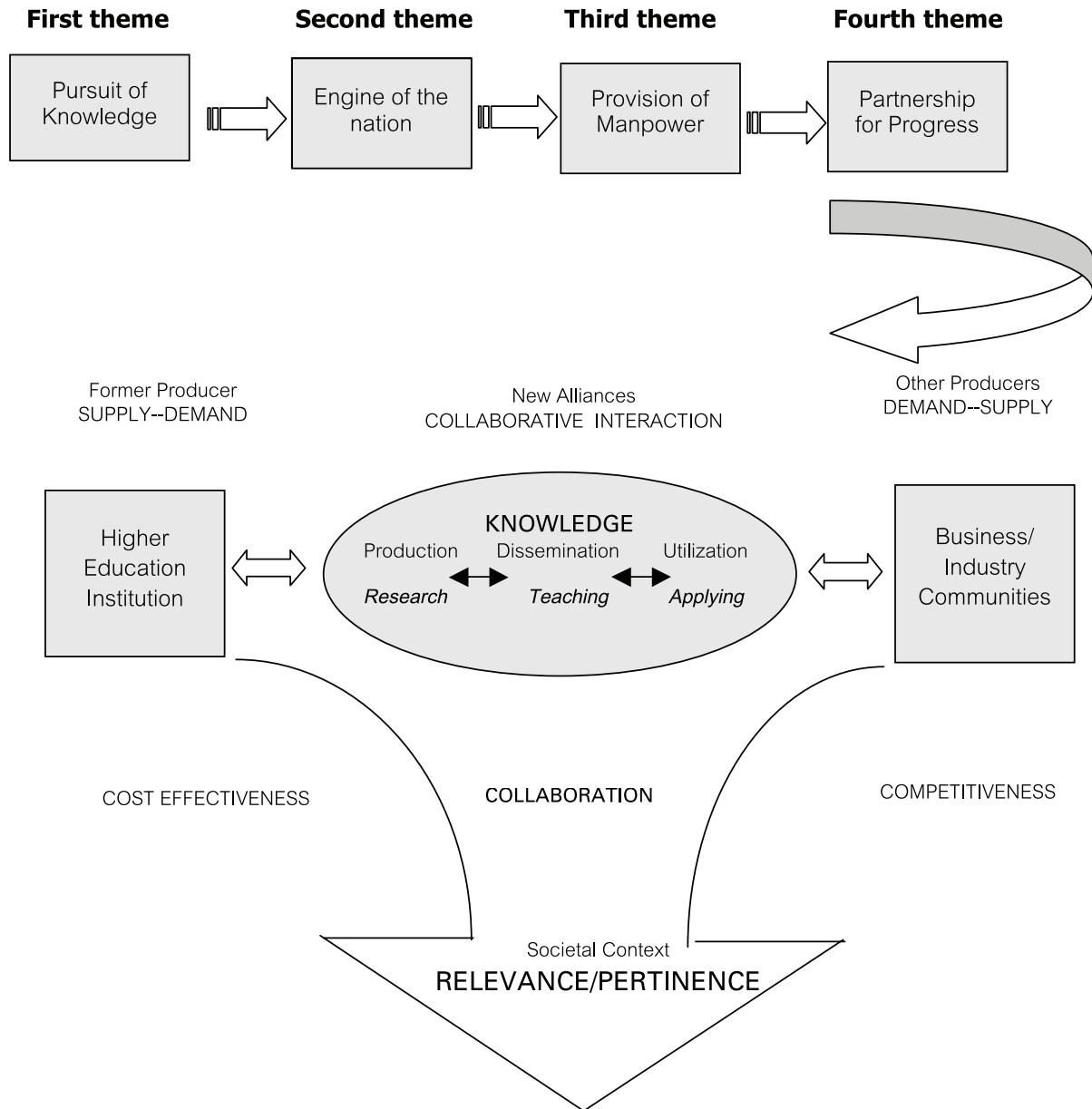
If the universities do not adapt, they will be by-passed...

Hague (1991)

As the world becomes increasingly complex and dynamic, survival of higher education institution in the next era is critical upon the ability to interact effectively with other social entities. Gibbons (1998) highlighted the emergence of a socially distributed knowledge production system in which higher education was one of the key partners. The new characteristics of higher education institutions will be distinctive under the themes of practicality and relevance. The following diagram illustrates the advancement of higher education in an ethos of partnership and collaboration.



The New themes of Thailand's Education : Partnership for progress



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In the above diagram, the development of Thailand's higher education was divided into four different themes. Universities in the old days were conceived to serve the elite or the socially well-off. In the past decades, higher education institutions had gradually evolved to become the major producers of qualified or trained manpower to accommodate the country's growing economy. The recent restructuring movement to dismantle the public university status has put higher education institutions into the newly realigned role as being a co-producer with other knowledge production entities. As higher education cannot afford to be the sole supplier of skilled workforce, business, industry, and communities alike can no longer be the sole users of graduates. All are required to adopt an active role in the production, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge as well. Soon, higher education institutions and business communities will work in collaborative efforts to provide relevant education to the society.

Featured characteristics of excellence in higher education

By now, both public and private universities are aware that to remain competitive in the future arena of higher education, it is of great necessity and urgency to redefine excellence and ways to realize it. Education experts reaffirmed that academic excellence will no longer be a matter of choice but an increasing necessity to survival. Robert Berdahl, Chancellor of University of California at Berkeley, upon his visit to Thailand, observed that "Convergence" or the "Blurring boundaries" phenomena would become the main theme of higher education in the coming century. Interconnectedness with or reaching out to the external entities, collaboration among academic and industry, cross-disciplinary, and excellence are evident in the following four areas:

- **Cross- or interdisciplinary** and Multi-function departmentalization, i.e. recent merging between College of Engineering and College of Natural Science. Evolution or change in medical treatment, for instance, from major surgery to microscopic operation, has by far combining the work of physicist, engineer, and computer technologist to the rethinking of medical delivery.
- **Interconnectedness/partnership, networking and alliances** with the outside world. Higher education institution will be less self-contained activities putting the Ivory Tower era to an end. Higher education institutions will have to adopt the multi-partnership approach, or working as the consortium of institutions sharing expertise and resources. Higher education



will mediate with business in which from now on will be both the co-producer and user of knowledge. More collaboration with industry for knowledge exchange and increasing support will be apparent. The interdependency of education from primary, secondary to tertiary, collaboration with public schools to prepare a qualified pool of inputs for higher education is foreseeable trend.

- **Globalization.** The advent of computer technology has wiped out national boundary when it comes to education. A whole new world beyond traditional campus is opening, e.g. virtual university, the cyber academic institutes.

- **Unitary status.** There will be no distinction between public or private university. Public universities will rely more upon external funding and self-sufficient while maintaining their public duties and functions.

What lies ahead therefore is the challenge for university administrators to accept and cope with change. Successful past may hinder the needs for change. Entrepreneurial spirit and commitment to excellence are perhaps the best guardian of effective change to survive the dynamic turn into the next century.

Shared vision: The Six-senses of a functional person

As the road ahead is seemingly foreseeable as described above, it is critical to redefine the outcome of higher education, at the other end of the production continuum, that would be accepted and shared by the society. A model of functional citizenry has been proposed to describe the target output the university is obliged to produce for the public at large. Essentially, the function citizenry is defined as having desirable senses to function effectively as the manpower and member of the society. Educational institutions of all level must work in concerted efforts with all other institutions to instill and induce these senses in each and every of the graduates.

The six senses of a functional person was proposed based on the author's personal concern, ambition, and expectation of the desirable attributes of the members in the healthy community. These senses simply aim at portraying certain desirable characteristics of the graduates and do not claim exclusivity. The underlying assumption is that the society needs the pool of educated citizenry who can function, participate, and make fruitful contribution bringing about a healthy society. The six senses are:



- **Sense of mission and urgency** – know what to do and when to do things

This may be considered the first and foremost sense that must be enhanced in a person. A sense of mission provides an individual with definite goals and directions. A clear sense of mission enables a person to become fully aware of the situation - - knowing what needs to be done and why it has to be done. It is analogous to having a built-in compass that closely maps and monitors the current situation and thus automatically allowing a person to elicit appropriate responses. It is equally important for the person to feel the need to accomplish a mission in due time. Knowing what to do is as equally important as knowing when to do it. Many projects and plans fail simply because they are untimely carried out. A sense of urgency puts a person on caution and alert to continuous development and improvement to achieve better results.

- **Sense of Independence** – being able to assert one's idea, and stand firm on one's belief. Independence in this sense is close to being self-reliant socially and economically. It is important that the sense of independence be instilled in a person early on. Being independent does not mean living in isolation. But on the contrary, the sense of independence enables a person to develop and acquire necessary competency in as much as one could live in harmony with others and, more importantly, be less of a burden to the society.

- **Sense of Quality** – striving for excellence in all aspects, continuously improving and developing to become qualified members of the society. A sense of quality is compatible to the notion of excellence reflected in all of the individual initiatives and actions. The functional person is one who is quality-conscious and continuously pursue on self-improvement and development. The sense of quality ensures that maximum efforts will always be put into the work process.

- **Sense of Responsibility** – be accountable, reliable, participating in decision-making and sharing of consequences. A fully functional adult is one who demonstrates noticeably high level of civic responsibility and self-disciplinary. It is obviously becoming everyone's responsibility to help bringing about a higher quality of life. What the society needs most especially during the crisis is the realization that each and every one of us becomes the doers and be less of the blamers.

- **Sense of Community** – pro-social, caring, looking for common good. Realizing the fact and necessity that nothing can exist in isolation. What unites the nation is the strong community. Thailand will gain its strength from the traditional Thai ways of giving and sharing -- the only social asset perhaps that remains undamaged by the current economic crisis. Group strength and cohesiveness serve as the strong foundation for the community and the nation



on a larger scale.

- **Sense of Ethical/Moral** – high moral and shared belief in universal virtue, and high value for personal integrity, ability to live consciously and spiritually. People with strong moral ground will serve as the pillar of the society. They are those who respect others and live their lives in harmony with other humankind and the nature.

These senses need to be cultivated as well as conserved through the supportive social infrastructure comprising education and culture; shared belief and experience of the past and future; and family and kinship system. These three elements serve as the social fabrication and work in concerted effort to enable the cultivation and conservation process. Such social infrastructures reflect how important the role of higher education and their contribution are to the development of the functional person. In this model, the family and kinship is included as the source of support, strength, and inspiration of an individual. Behind the success of many is often attributable to the strong and happy family.

The functional citizenry shall demonstrate congruency in their pattern of thinking, working, and living life purposefully. All in all, they are the committed folks who look outwardly sharing concern and commitment by putting society before self. They serve as productive manpower as well as the morally ground manhood.

In pursuits of academic excellence: A panacea for all or else

No matter how much pressure is put on a person or social system to change through disconfirmation and the induction of guilt-anxiety, no change will occur unless members of the system feel it is safe to give up the old responses and learn something new...

Edgar Schein, p.77.

External forces, especially the current movement towards quality assurance led by the Ministry of University Affairs, scarcity of resources, and the ‘non-governmental status’ movement, have intensified the needs for institutional survival. To cope with the retrenchment, higher education institutions need a good strategy to guide them out of the tunnel. A flickering ray of hope is the revival of academic excellence in which from now on will become a matter of necessity rather than an option for university administrators.

Developing a new sense of purpose or a new mission of the future university for the people will call for the new maps to put education excellence into practice. To many, academic



excellence is a multi-faceted term with diverse interpretations and approaches when putting into practices. Different institutions have pursued on excellence in ways that are congruent with their perceptions and institutional requirements. Despite varied definitions and interpretations, the author is of opinion that each educational institution should familiarize itself with academic excellence and design their own approach to accomplish excellence in ways and means that are best for them. Excellence needs to be redefined to be relevant to the Thai context taking into account constraints and unique characteristics of the institutions. In this sense, excellence must be pursued on an institutional-wide basis and ensured consensual participatory of all concerned parties and stakeholders. More importantly, academic excellence needs to be approached holistically, like having a “built-in” mechanism, in every aspects of higher education administration.

Putting pieces together: Implications for Thai universities

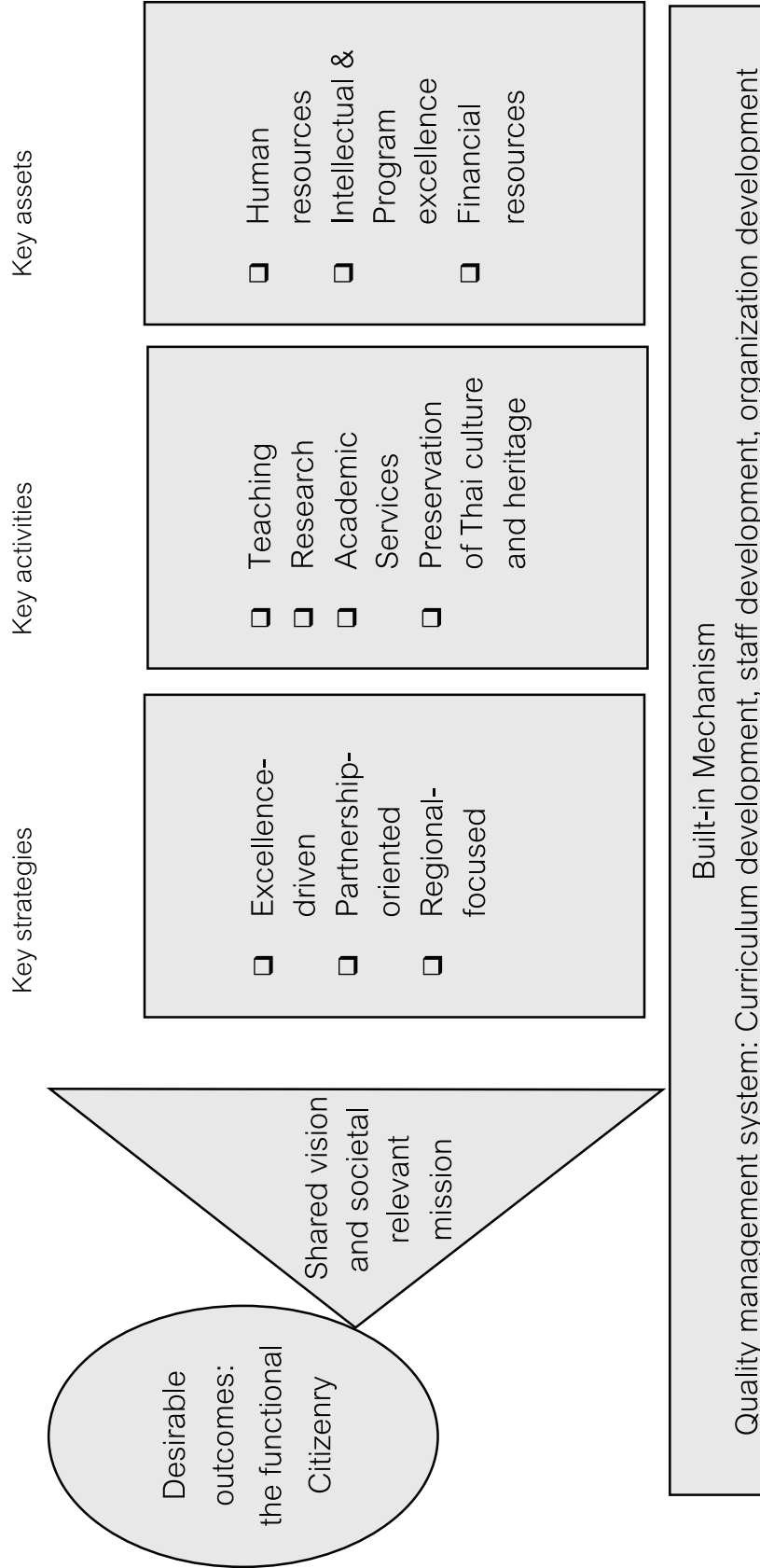
The following model was created to illustrate the holistic view of university’s internal functions energized, guided, and supported by the notion of excellence. Excellence is no longer the virtuous ambition subjected to criticism of being too remote and unreal but a contingent strategy to endure the tidal wave of changes. The framework acknowledged three main components including key activities, assets and attributes of an excellent institution of higher learning.

Academic excellence should encompass outstanding contributions to solving societal problems as well as to the advancement of knowledge. A reform university must be encouraged to link the new frontier of knowledge through the partnership approach with other real world practitioners to resolve societal ills and problems. In this regard, higher education must demonstrate the ability to balance between the competing interests of their constituencies and the national needs. Practically, excellent institutions should demonstrate the ability to provide relevant education and the common characteristics, for instance:

- A mission well known to the community and shared by the staff
- The presence and recognition of good governance and leadership
- Significant emphasis on teamwork and the creation of strong administrative teams with high spirit of collaboration
- Deep concern to community needs and its support
- The focus on excellence and effective use of pooled resources



Strategic framework enhancing excellence in the university





- Ability to connect with a wide range of development partners, and business/industry
- An atmosphere that promotes individual initiatives and recognition
- An intense concern for quality of the education provided to students and the experience earned by the faculty
- The capacity to be responsive to the external environment opportunities

Academic excellence in the new era will cope not only with the declining resources but also with increasing public demand for efficiency and effectiveness. However, it is considered a must to always put excellence on top of other priorities. That is, excellence should be the prime reason for all institutional change efforts. Likewise, the essence or goal of the transformation must be to strengthen university capability to be responsive to societal needs, not to be superseded by the side goal as the increase of payment and fringe benefits. Unfortunately, however, discussion and argument to justify the transformation often centers upon many tangible benefits the new status shall bring. Though it becomes apparent that Thailand's universities will be operated in a business-like manner focusing on profits and survival, the sheer difference remains that university has been and always will in the business of making and adding value to men.

The next millennium is perhaps another critical juncture of renewal and redirection of Thailand's higher education institutions. Though a little hazy this road to the future may seem, striving for academic excellence and internal efficiency will be the two best bets ensuring a steady and sturdy move regardless of unexpected cuts and turns.

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