



Towards the 21st Century

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This is already the fourth week of our HR/POST project. This week I have invited my good friend, Dr. Suchit Bunbongkarn, Dean of the Political Science Faculty, Chulalongkorn University to discuss education and what the country should be doing in this vital sector.

I remember about 6 months ago in Manila, Dr. Suchit and I shared our concerns about education and wondered whether the system could change fast enough to meet the future requirements of society. I said that in my opinion, we should not rely too heavily on the ministries of Education and University Affairs, because they do not seem to have either the strategies or the vision to change course.

Last week we encountered similar bureaucratic obstacles in our discussions about the agricultural sector. The reasons for these weaknesses in the various institutions and ministries are easily explained; top bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education are usually graduates from teacher training colleges, while their counterparts in the Ministry of Agriculture are usually graduates from Kasetsart University. Please don't get me wrong, I am not against those Universities. It is just that I believe that in any organization we must have diversity so that we get innovative and fresh ideas on how to do a better job.

As far as education is concerned, when I look at my own country I don't feel much hope. Despite Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's commitment to spending more money on education than ever before, I still wonder if we are using it wisely. When will we have a public debate on the issue of education, and start to see real solutions put into place?

Living in a competitive world I worry that in the not too distant future, education will prove a drawback to our long term development. In Malaysia education is a cornerstone of policymaking. Their Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has told me that Malaysia's budget for vocational training already accounts for 30% of the total education budget. And yet in Thailand, despite a robust economy, more than 50% of the same budget goes on primary education. We have talked about extending compulsory education by 3 years for a very long time, but shouldn't we also look at the budget for higher education, for instance to upgrade the skills of roughly 2.3 million mainly female primary school leavers.

Let me give you a few more dramatic examples of our backwardness. A new Ph.D. in engineering teaching at Chulalongkorn University receives a salary of 8,000-10,000 baht per month, while a year before they graduate his students have already received offers of 20,000 baht. Or take the fact that when Cabinet positions are allocated, candidates make the "C" ranked Education Ministry one of their last preferences.

Only 3 years ago, the percentage of students going on to secondary education in Thailand was less than 40%. The government may have taken some steps in the right direction, but it is still a question of "too little, too late".

Then there are the cabinet ministers who complain that Thais speak too much English. In the world of globalization, nobody understands Thai. On the contrary, we should be promoting more effective English learning. In Vietnam and China the hunger for learning English is tremendous.

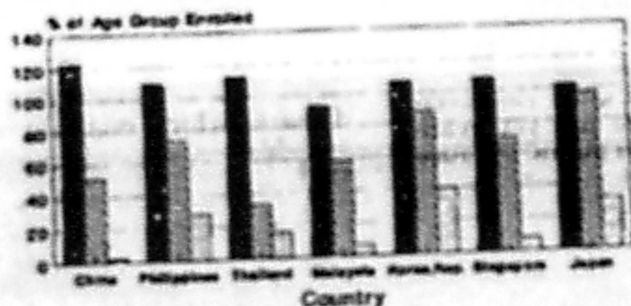
In addition there is an obsession among students for joining the managerial stream. In my own backyard, here at Thammasat, many excellent engineering and science undergraduates would prefer to study finance or marketing. Who then will develop Thailand's technological and R&D capabilities?

To conclude, human resource managers must understand these weaknesses and inefficiencies in our educational system and find what solutions they can. Highly skilled manpower is in short supply and job hopping is like a disease attacking human resources management. Everybody needs to continually improve their productivity, the question is, without effective human resources, how will we accomplish this?

% of Age Group Enrolled in Education 1991

■ Primary ■ Secondary □ Tertiary

Source: ESCAP
Non-Arbitrary Date of Eng. Year 2000



% of Education Budget per GDP.

■ Series 1

