

# **Education Reform and E-Learning in Thailand**

C. Saowapon<sup>1</sup>, T. Laohajaratsaeng<sup>2</sup>, R. Thammajinda<sup>3</sup> and S. Singharajwarapan<sup>4</sup>

## **Introduction**

Thailand's relatively weak human resource base has been pinpointed as one of the underlying factors influencing the recent economic and financial crisis. The Thai education system discourages the development of creativity and individuality amongst students. These conclusions brought home the need for a thorough re-examination of the Country's human resource development system and have already set the stage for across-the-board reforms in the education system.

## **A Vision for the Thai People in the New Millennium**

Education in this century should aim to fully development all aspects of the Thai individual; good physical and mental health, intellect, knowledge, morality, integrity, and the desire of the individual to live in harmony with other people. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra outlined his vision on the education of Thailand's Youth at the Government House April 29, 2001. He said,

"We want graduates who are prepared to be this nation's good human resources. I would like them to have global literacy, think well, be eager for lifelong learning and able to adapt to change. In addition to obtaining knowledge, they must know how to apply it. Today we have many scholars who are good at theories and papers, but don't know how to apply

<sup>1</sup>Director, Computer Service Center, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai, THAILAND 50200.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Technology, Faculty of Education, Chiang Mai University.

<sup>3</sup>Deputy Director, Computer Service Center, Chiang Mai University.

<sup>4</sup>Assistant President, Office of the President, Chiang Mai University.

them to real life. In schools, children are taught only to recite, make a check on the exam papers and then graduate. It is like this in the universities as well. We have to study the failures of the past and the present and make assumptions for the future. All should be based on non-biased information.”

## **The Need for Education Reform in Thailand**

The current Thai education system uses a teacher focused lecture approach. That is, in most classrooms the lesson and activities focus around the teacher’s desk or blackboard. This “chalk and talk” relies solely on lectures and rote memorization. The development of creativity and individuality seems minimal at both the elementary and secondary level.

This is not to say the current system is not entirely bad, but in this age of rapid information technology advances and greater international competition, an effective educational system today should aim to cultivate within each student the skills to search out knowledge using a variety of knowledge-based sources. Learning should be continual and not location specific or limited.

Recognizing the urgent need for education reform, the 1997 Thai Constitution included extensive provisions on education. The right of all children to twelve years of basic quality education free of charge, the promotion of local wisdom, the promotion of the national arts and culture, and the development of the teaching profession were several noteworthy provisions. These provisions were then empowered in the National Education Act (NEA) 1999 which became effective since August of 1999. The Act represents an unprecedented and long over-due break from traditional. A foundation seems to be in place now for a more creative, questioning approach to learning.

## **Learning Reform**

According to the National Education Act 1999, learning reform is at the heart of all concerned. As stated in Section 22, "Education shall be based on the principle that all learners are capable of learning and self-development, and are regarded as being most important. The teaching-learning process shall aim at enabling the learners to develop themselves at their own pace and to the best of their potential." According to the Act, the provision of education shall be based upon the principles of a lifelong education for all; the participation of all segments of society in educational provisions; and continuous development of bodies of knowledge and the learning process.

## **Role of E-Learning in Learning Reform**

In organizing the learning process, the educational institutes and agencies concerned need to provide substance and arrange activities in line with the learners' interests and aptitudes, bearing in mind individual differences. Training must also be offered to cultivate the thinking process to prepare individuals for a variety of situations and problems they may encounter. Teachers must change their role from that of the "informer" to that of the "facilitator." Learners will need to reach out more on their own given a bases which includes knowledge on how to learn, where to get information, and how to make use of it. In so doing, both learners and teachers may learn together through the use of different types of teaching-learning media and other sources of knowledge.

Since E-Learning moves education in the direction of "learner centered" learning and can be facilitated most anywhere and at any time with adequate computer facilities and access. E- Learning can perhaps be part of the educational reform process in Thailand.

## **E-Learning at the Post-Secondary Level**

The total number of students graduating from high school in the year 2000 was about 719,129 while the enrollment in Thai Universities was 346,675. This is about 48% of Thailand's high school graduates. Of the above mentioned 346,675 students, 158,752 enroll in limited admission universities and 187,923 enroll in one of two open universities. It is interesting to note the two government open universities educate the majority of Thailand's post-secondary students. How do these two universities facilitate such student number? Both of these universities make use of modern technologies (i.e., radio and television broadcastings) and are affordable. Both also plan to extend their services and the students they can reach by tapping into E-learning. Ramkhamhaeng University, one of the open universities, declared that they will attempt to put all their in house developed course textbooks online.

What is the future of E-Learning? What numbers will it attract? With government policy providing twelve years of basic education for young people free of charge, the number of students available to continue on increases significantly. In the year 2007 Thailand anticipates as many as 984,015 high school graduates. And then in 2016 this number is expected to increase to about 1,771,432 students, which is about 2.5 times the present number of graduates. This fact alone presents post-secondary educators with a challenge! E-Learning will hopefully be a big part of the solution allowing post-secondary education to reach larger numbers and in distance location whether on campuses or in homes.

To prepare the necessary infrastructure for E-Learning at the post-secondary education level, the Ministry of University Affairs (MUA) launched a project called UNINET (Inter-University Network) in 1997. The UNINET project provides national and international education network services in an

effort to enable research and development to proceed at all universities and institutions of higher education in Thailand. To date, this project provided the high speed fiber optic links to 51 higher education institutes and provide them with Internet access and video conferencing systems. In the last two years the MUA also provided a budget for the production of 30 online coursewares. These coursewares will be developed at a number of Thailand's higher education institutes. To date 13 have been completed.

E-Learning is a popular topic of discussion these days amongst educators in Thailand and this point was further brought forward when two large E-Learning conferences took place each with more than 250 participants attending. Further, several universities introduced new policies setting aside significant funding for the development of E-Learning coursewares. Chiang Mai University is now developing five multimedia coursewares which should be available online by the end of this year.

### **Quality assurance mechanisms**

Assessment is a key factor and can affect students learning behavior. Chapter 6 of the NEA 1999 is about Educational Standards and Quality Assurance. The goal of this chapter is to assure the public that what is going on in colleges and universities is high quality. There are provisions in the law for both internal and external reviews concerning the quality and quality of learning. The MUA set up an Office of the National Education Standards (ONES) in November of 2000. ONES are responsible for setting up a system and mechanisms of internal quality assurance for institutions to follow the NEA 1999.

In Thailand, E- Learning is in the early stages of development so quality assurance mechanisms concerning the

educational process still only cover existing teaching-learning methods and are primarily based on classroom teaching. The hope is that E-Learning will be used widely and within a short time appropriate quality assurance mechanisms will develop in parallel.

## **Conclusion**

E-Learning as part of educational reform in Thailand will allow Thai students to become “self learners” and will hopefully move Thailand in the direction of “student centered” learning. E-Learning will allow Thai students to study anywhere, at anytime and at their own pace. Three great positives for the education system in Thailand.

E-learning is exciting these days and offers numerous possibilities for distance learning, and the education of large number of post-secondary students. E-learning, however big it may become or however extensive it may reach does have some limits and hence one needs to stay focussed on the larger objective of meeting education needs for the future. What limitations you may ask? For one we are all very social beings! Classrooms despite their limitations offer human contact and a great deal of learning is social. While a great deal of distance learning will reach out to all of us educators will likely also need to look at E-learning opportunities on campus where traditional instructional methods can perhaps overlap with E-learning techniques and offer the best of both systems.