

# Lesson Learned From Organizational Change:

## A Case of Autonomous University in Thailand

Taweesak Kritjaroen, Natakorn Limsuwanrot, Winai Homsombat

**Abstract**— The economic crisis in 1997 caused tremendous changes to higher education system in Thailand, in particular the decentralization of university's administration. A number of Thai public universities have been gradually transforming to be autonomous universities. However, almost all cannot achieve the most important goal for academic excellence as reflected by global recognition. During the transitional period, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) was the only public university that transformed from a university under the Civil Services to be an autonomous public university. The university could sustain as one of the leading universities and be ranked in the top 400 World university by Times Higher Education (THE). It relatively outperformed other universities and was regarded as a role model for Thai higher education development. This research aimed to figure out how autonomous public universities could manage to secure from the Thai bureaucratic system and innovate themselves to sustain continuous improvement in the world class university leagues. Key factors influencing autonomous public university to be recognized as a leading and world-class university were explored. Research data were studied and gathered from primary source by an in-depth interview from KMUTT management teams and other relevant stakeholders. Secondary data were also used such as the university's documents and other related studies. Findings from descriptive and content analyses revealed that leadership and teamwork have played crucial roles for KMUTT during the transitional period. Strategic foresight with various initiative projects by KMUTT management team in 1998 created sharp-and-shared vision that paved the way of science and technology university to be one of the leading universities in Thailand and successfully stepped into the world-class university. A commitment to be Learning University has substantially influenced KMUTT to be ranked among world-class university and resulted in present success.

**Keywords**— *organizational change; autonomous universities*

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Taweesak Kritjaroen  
Graduate School of Management and Innovation  
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi  
Bangkok, Thailand

Natakorn Limsuwanrot  
Graduate School of Management and Innovation  
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi  
Bangkok, Thailand

Winai Homsombat  
Graduate School of Management and Innovation  
King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi  
Bangkok, Thailand

## I. Introduction

Thai public universities have been considered weak and lacked dynamism under the control of government since 1960s. The First 15-years Plan for Higher Education (1990-2004) thus called for autonomy of public universities to improve the public universities in several aspects, particularly world class recognition. The plan for autonomous entity aims to enhance self-management for Thai public universities in areas such as academic matters, personnel and finance. According to such plan, only three new universities – Suranaree University of Technology, Walailak University and Mae Fah Luang University – have been established as autonomous universities. The results on most traditionally public universities were somehow unexpected, since most of them remained under the government's control. It was more likely that they were afraid of change and ignorant of benefits of autonomous universities [1]. Even until the great economic crisis in 1997 that Thai Government made a commitment to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in securing a financial aid in education that existing public universities need to be transformed to autonomous public universities by 2002 [1]. The government wanted to lower public budget in higher education and encouraged Thai public universities to become autonomous, transformation of Thai universities was very rare and challenging. This implies that most Thai public universities have not been prompt in dealing with social dynamics and creating something different from their status quo.

Currently, although a number of Thai public universities have been gradually transforming to be autonomous, almost all cannot achieve a goal for global recognition. At present, there is only one university that has been listed in the top 400 World university, ranked by Times Higher Education (THE), for two consecutive years (2012 and 2013) which is King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). This university was the only public university that transformed from a university under the Civil Services to an autonomous public university during the first five years after the economic collapse in 1997. It could sustain development as a leading university and advance in science and technology. It can be said that the university can present a successful case of transformation.

Many interesting research questions have been emerged according to the current development of higher education system of Thailand. The purpose of this study is to explore how autonomous public universities manage to secure from the bureaucracy and innovate themselves to sustain as a leading university. This study will identify key factors influencing autonomous public university to be ranked among world-class university. Educationists and government agencies want to figure out whether the autonomy of public universities

really help stipulate sustainable competitive advantage of higher education system in the global arena. With limitation of financial support from the government, how the autonomous public university like KMUTT will sustain in the long run? As far as researchers are aware, only limited studies have touched upon these issues, but not comprehensively covered. Therefore, to get more insight and track the development of Thai universities in a new era, this study utilizes KMUTT as a case study to explore findings related to the aforementioned issues. This research would benefit not only academic scholars, but also higher education policy makers and practitioners. Findings from this study will help draw an appropriate policy recommendation for advancing Thai higher education system, and other countries with similar development, to be able to sustain in the global integration era. Major contribution from this study could be summarized as follows:

(1) To generate more understanding about theory and concept of innovative and learning organization in terms of higher education organizations;

(2) To use best practices of successful autonomous public university to be guidelines for organization development of other public universities; and

(3) To stimulate and raise the awareness of higher education reform as the 'global trendy strategy' for sustainable universities.

The structure of this paper is laid out as follows. Section II presents related studies and research design used for this study. Research findings are expressed in Section III. Last section provides concluding remarks and practical implications for policy makers and relevant stakeholders.

## II. Literature Review and Research Design

The emergence of KMUTT as an autonomous university was in March 1998. In early stage of transformation, KMUTT encountered many difficulties in dealing with the bureaucracy system and, most importantly, on budgets as it had to self-finance. People questioned how KMUTT could successfully manage and handle such issues. When any organizations face with change or restructure to improve performance and survive from the crisis, they have to adjust their vision and mission. The organizations have to implement any measures to retain the best staff and manage trouble from external pressures. This type of organization is called high-performance organizations (HPO), which KMUTT was named to be. Buytendijk [2] described that HPO should meet the following five characteristics, which are 1) ambitious goals, 2) shared values (both inside and outside the organization), 3) strategic focus and alignment, 4) organizational agility, and 5) shared business model. As an education institution with limited resources, to manage organization towards HPO need to have appropriate learning system to support employees' learning at all levels, because they are currently knowledge workers [3]. Learning organization would essentially lead to innovative organization which in turn foster the university to achieve HPO.

As an autonomous university, the KMUTT management team launched the proactive strategy, called the KMUTT

Roadmap 2020, and came up with KMUTT new vision which comprises 5 angles, which are 1) committed to the search for knowledge, 2) determined to be at the forefront of technology and research, 3) maintaining the development of accomplished and proficient graduates, 4) endeavoring for success and honor for our community, and 5) striving to become a world-class university. Among scholars, one of the common approaches to define "world-class" is through the ongoing development of ranking in league tables such as the Times Higher Education World University Ranking and the QS World University Ranking. Even the two ranking agencies have different evaluation criteria, they have common indicators that emphasizes heavily on teaching quality, research output, internationalization, prestige and impact [4]. This could serve as a guideline for educational institution to improve operation.

Driving the university towards HPO requires well-planned strategies to underpin the organization's vision and mission. While there have been a large body of literature in private sector, research findings in educational field remain rare. Among the others, Te-chotiros [5] studied the strategies for Rajamangala University of Technology Phra Nakhon's development plan and found out that the university identified 9 key important areas to achieve the excellence including all university missions such as holistic integrated curriculum development, strengthening specific vocational education, strategic management, student development, professional development, academic service to community, art, culture and environment conservation, integrated research invention and innovation development, and knowledge published and transferred. These strategic plan helps improve the university's potential and competitiveness for higher education, so that it can design appropriate curriculums to respond the industrial needs.

Chotipipatworakul et al. [6] pointed out 8 key strategic dimensions to guideline the administrative development of Rajamangala University of Technology. The study suggested key managerial areas to be focused including:

- For plan and policy development, the university needs to review its philosophy or resolution to cope with current situation and maintains its uniqueness and areas of specialization, and establish the strategic plans for implementation.
- For administration and management plans, it is a need that the university has to restructure to be autonomous and flexible in management, follow-up the plan implementation and sets the quality evaluation system of the University and administrators, develop the effective management of information technology system, and promote participative management to stimulate the university's personnel to utilize their knowledge and competency.
- For personnel administration, there is a need to establish personnel development plans to deliver continuously developed results.
- For financial and assets administration, the university needs to establish the budget plans aligned with the university development plan.
- For producing graduate matters, the university has to establish the cooperative program to produce graduates to meet the needs of public and private sectors, and

establish the academic linkage among the institutions of higher learning with national and international networks.

- For research administration, there is a need to set the research policies to meet the problems, needs and expectation of the society and private sectors, and establish research networks with local administrative units, public organizations and private sectors.
- For academic services to the society, the university has to establish the academic services to the society networks with public administrative units and local private sectors.
- For art and cultural preservation, the university has to establish networks with several sources including local administrative units, public organizations, and private sectors to develop the learning process of art and cultural preservation.

In addition, current model of organizational change and development is geared towards sustainability. Mio [7] studied Ca' Foscari University's path towards a sustainable university and explored two successful factors: 1) governance system, and 2) strategic planning system. The sustainable university needs to identify precise responsibilities and establish organizational units dedicated to sustainability theme. In addition, the university should adopt 'sustainability' as a proactive strategy, extending sensitivity and awareness of the environmental and social themes among all stakeholders both inside and outside the university.

As it is believed that learning university is the influencing factor of world-class university, [8] indicated several aspects to justify whether one develops in a right way. Those criteria include an organization structure, learning culture, job empowerment and responsibility, environment scanning, knowledge creation and transfer, technology for learning, quality focus, strategy, working atmosphere, teamwork and network, and shared vision. [9] stated that if the university has additionally focused on open communication, people driven, management support on physical aspects, and accessible information supporting innovation process, such university's development will ultimately lead to innovative organization.

This study used qualitative methodology. Main sources of data are gathered from primary source by the in-depth interview and secondary sources by necessary information such as the university's documents and other related researches. In-depth interviews involved the current and former KMUTT management team and other relevant stakeholders. The study results are presented by using content analysis.

### III. Research Findings

It is believed that the pathway of KMUTT to achieve its vision requires strong leadership, well-planned strategic foresight, and strategic learning organization approach. Leadership and teamwork played crucial role during KMUTT's transitional period. Strategic foresight of KMUTT executives created sharp vision that paves the way of science

and technology university to become forefront university in Thailand and successfully jump to the world-class university. From the synthesis of data from KMUTT executive interviews, KMUTT development towards high performance university from the last two decades involved three main dimensions:

1. **Academic Administration:** KMUTT has had more flexibility in adjusting curriculums to fit with industrial demand. It was the pioneer university in Thailand developing modern general education courses for all undergraduate students. The general education program aims to craft students to be social change agent with professionalism and integrity through diverse learning approaches such as problem-based learning, research-based learning and activity-based learning, and student-centered teaching. These novel learning methods are in line with the university's strategic goal which is to develop the best and brightest students by humanization. The reason why KMUTT wants their graduates to be social change agent is because those graduates will be the next generation leaders in the society. It is important to embed social responsibility attitude to the students. Apart from teaching, KMUTT emphasizes their staff to do high impact research and provide relevant social services. With innovative study programs and industrial engagement, this proved the university is moving forward in the right way in serving market needs.
2. **Human Resources Management:** As KMUTT is a medium-sized university with approximately 800 academic staff and 1,400 supporting staff, it can productively achieve effective communication and strong organizational culture. These are vital factors for KMUTT human resource development, which well encourages staff to exert themselves for working excellence. More importantly, KMUTT leaders play crucial role in coaching and monitoring the young-blood staff. They provide opportunities for new staff to create innovation in the areas of their interest and learn the university management matters as a shadowing executive. KMUTT has stewardship program for new staff members who are the university think tanks and have high potential to be a successor of university's executives. This is an unique planning system in which KMUTT can maintain and continue its mission until success.
3. **Financial Management:** KMUTT can manage annual budget more effectively. Previously as a state-owned university, if the planned budget was less consumed, the university had to return to the central government. This was recognized as ineffective budget management. Even though the budget was indeed needed, it could not reserve the remaining for the following year plan. The university had to go through



new procedure for budget approval. This creates unnecessary work in which it does not need to do once it becomes an autonomous university. Therefore, KMUTT is more flexible for the financial planning. In current years, the university can have one year plan and is also able to design for additional two more years.

KMUTT shows significant advantages from being an autonomous public university. It has more flexibility in terms of organization management. This allows the KMUTT management team to create strategic foresight to accelerate the institution achievement. This transformational university could be a role model for other universities to secure better and sustainable future. Most important driven factor in the last fifteen years has been the commitment of KMUTT to be Learning University and Sustainability Theme. According to Mio [7], the principles and characteristics of sustainable universities consisted of two elements which were technical-technological and strategic-organizational approaches. This study suggested that technical-technological approach should be analyzed by curricula in all teaching disciplines, research, and outreach and partnership with industries. For strategic-organizational approach, governance systems and strategy, stakeholder engagement, performance measurement and evaluation systems with sustainability key performance indicators (KPI), outcome indicators from the set of KPI, and reporting systems should be focused. Regarding technical-technological approach, KMUTT has significantly contributed to the society from doing high impact research and relevant social services which were aligned with the Times Higher Education ranking criteria. Also, KMUTT has well-developed strategy formulation and evaluation system for academic administration, human resources management, and financial management plans in accordance with the university's core strategic focus (i.e. quality, productivity, and sustainability), which are consistent with Mio's strategic-organizational approach. This proved the KMUTT's development towards sustainable university.

#### IV. Concluding Remarks and Practical Implications

To enhance the educational institution's performance and competitiveness with strong intention to be ranked in the Global University Ranking, the autonomous public university would be another choice for higher education reform. However, it is merely the initial step for the world-class status. The findings from this research revealed that key driven factor to achieve sustainable innovative organization and higher ranking in the global university league is well-planned strategic foresight. KMUTT lesson-learned case demonstrated a practical example of policy transfer for any autonomous public universities with similar strategic goals.

The caution to be aware is from the difference between policy learning and policy replication. If the university follows policy practices without proper adaptation and careful

contextualization, there might result in problems from implementation [10]. As such, key factors from one example should be applied with appropriate context of the university. Although the case of KMUTT provides guideline for Thai university development, other universities should have their own ways and remain uniqueness of academic excellence.

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