

Internationalizing Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) in the Context of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC)

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Abstract. *It is no longer an option to internationalize higher education institutions in Southeast Asian countries in the ASEAN era. Therefore, this study is intended to explore the most crucial issues, and tactics required to internationalize one of the largest public universities in Northern Thailand, namely Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL). The researcher selected a qualitative approach and purposive sampling is used in this study, in order to value the diverse approaches to the internationalization of RMUTL in the ASEAN community. Data was collected from 16 executives, 13 of whom are in the upper-level of management in RMUTL, One participant is the former director of the (SEAMEO), and 2 participants are executives in a Thai Higher Education Institution. Further, the major findings of this study are constructed by providing a model for internationalizing RMUTL in the context of the ASEAN community. Ultimately, the researcher made some recommendations for future studies, and drew some conclusions.*

Keywords: Internationalization, RMUTL, ASEAN, Education, University

Introduction

When talking about education, both in Thailand and overseas, international education should be well thought-out as an essential part of both the rationale and construction of all universities. It should also be an imperative component of the Thai government's priorities, as it is involved in higher education in Thailand. In 2015, according to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) plan, there will be a free-flow of goods, services, investment, capital and skilled labors among the 10 countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Additionally, this research addressed the development of the internationalization of Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) in Northern Thailand in the ASEAN Economic Community. RMUTL is a leading university in Thailand, which offers effective education based on sciences and technological concepts in six campuses located in Northern Thailand. It aims to develop highly qualified graduates systematically, and in a sustainable way to become professional executives (President's Office, 2008). Most importantly, this research presents the indispensable practices that will lead to the internationalization of RMUTL as a whole in the proposed model.

Purposes of the Study

The researcher in this study developed the following three purposes: (1) to explore the issue of internationalizing RMUTL in the context of the AEC community; (2) to investigate the factors that

can facilitate the internationalization process of RMUTL in the AEC community ; and (3) to formulate a model to internationalize RMUTL in the context of the AEC community.

Research Questions

The three research questions for this study to answer are: (1) How can RMUTL be internationalized in the AEC community?; (2) What are the factors that can facilitate the internationalization of RMUTL in the AEC community?; and (3) What is a developmental model of the internationalization of RMUTL?.

Research Methodology

A 'pragmatism paradigm' was employed for this research, as the researcher was hoping that the comprehension provided will be of assistance to value the diverse approaches to the internationalization of RMUTL. Data was gathered by the in-depth qualitative interviews. The researcher in this study used purposive sampling, and conducted the interviews with 16 executives, 13 of whom are in the upper-level of management in RMUTL, One participant is the former director of the (SEAMEO-RIHED), and 2 participants are executives in a Thai Higher Education Institution. For the analysis task, using transcribed taped interviews; data was arranged according to the subjects raised; participants' answers were displayed in line numbers constructing some codes; and categories, and themes were defined.

Review of Literature

According to De Wit (1990), internationalization of higher education is the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service function of the institution. Similarly, Henson et al. (1990) mentioned that internationalization is defined as the incorporation of international content, materials, activities, and understanding into the teaching, research, and public service functions of a university to enhance their relevance in an interdependent community. According to Hayward (2002) internationalization could be viewed as an intentional national response to globalization used to facilitate understanding of global environment and ways of interaction in it. As Hayek (1996) advocated, there is no single accepted definition of internationalization. It is evident that Thailand has adopted the higher education philosophy and system from Western nations. Nevertheless, King Bhumibol had a clear intention to encourage his young manpower to create Thai identity in terms of art and culture, along with modern knowledge. The evidence of that can be seen today in Thai style university buildings, the styles of academic gowns and some courses in Thai arts, literature, language, history and Buddhism, offered by Thai universities along with the subjects adopted from Western countries (Chalapati, 2007).

The Movement of Internationalization in Thailand

At Chulalongkorn University (CU) the office of international affairs was set up to implement international relations by emphasizing cooperative activities, academic exchanges with international institutions, and academic services to international communities (Office of International Affairs CU, 2012). Briefly, this office provides several duties and services through, (a) international liaison and special affairs service; (b) overseas students, and exchange programs; and (c) international cooperation service.

At King Mongkut University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) the office of international affairs was set up to implement international relations by emphasizing the cooperation between KMUTT, and other institutions, both in the country and overseas, through the academic cooperation, staff and students exchanges, scholarships and grants for studying and training (Office of International Affairs, KMUTT, 2012).

At Mahidol University (MU) several activities for the promotion of internationalization of education are encouraged and supported. For example, actively collaborating with over 130 overseas academic institutions and international agencies in research, curriculum development, staff and student exchange; hosting 8 World Health Organizations (WHO) and collaborating centers, and a cooperative research station (CRS) in Southeast Asia; offering 148 international degree and diploma programs, excluding short training courses; has international students from over 50 countries enrolled; hosts regular international academic conferences in many disciplines and had over 1,450 research papers published in international academic journals in 2008 (International College, Mahidol University, 2012)

Results and Discussions

After an in-depth investigation, the research offered systematic explanations according to the intended purposes. Thus, the researcher compiled crucial factors that might lead to internationalize of RMUTL effectively, as presented in the proposed model. Moreover, the researcher discusses the major findings, in accordance with the literature reviewed. Thus, the researcher explores eight issues and its constituents, according to what has been discussed in the interviews, and found in the literature.

Strategic Plan

The researcher attempted to understand and to learn from the participants of this study, aspects that can make a powerful strategic plan to create a successful international RMUTL. Hence, the participants of this study corroborated that unambiguous HRD practices, and interventions; dealing with resistance to change; prioritizing; developing our personnel career-path; applying a powerful analysis method; developing effective action plans; rigorously implement strategies and plans; creating the university of understanding (UOU); developing competencies for both executives, and staff; decentralized management approach; developing apposite, clear, and flexible plans; and developing comprehensive contingency plans are all considered essentials for developing a strategic plan, which can lead to a successful international environment. Salmi (2009) illustrated strategic features that help in developing a world-class university (e.g., effective leadership, a brilliant vision, an unambiguous strategic plan, confront all weaknesses, modify and improve the plan for better performance, an accurate series of plans and actions, and great emphasis to be granted to the internationalization strategy of the university). Further, Knight and De Wit (1999) stated that mounting a comprehensive image of the ontology and scope of internationalization activities can be both an instructive and a devastating responsibility. Therefore, at the School of Architecture and Allied Arts at the University of Oregon, it became evident through their committee's tasks that an incentive system and support infrastructure for faculty contribution in international activities are still required (Dewey & Duff, 2009). Additionally, the participants noted that "*we must have a contingency plan for any emergency. The plan should include both human, and non-human resources, such as budget or equipment*". Furthermore, the participants explored other critical issues, as follows: develop our teaching, and learning system; respond to skills required by labor markets; differentiate ourselves from other universities; create opportunities to exchange students, and staff; strengthen our curricula; build RMUTL brand; sufficient budget for foreign staff recruitment; recruit adequate numbers of foreign students; and develop consultative expert working group on the ASEAN countries. One comment was:

we need to do something that can be attractive to attract foreign students to our education. We are planning to provide scholarships, and promote our university through the use of information technology (IT), and we have to have our website in many languages.

Challenging Policies

The researcher found the need for the following policies: academic, professional qualifications, and teaching and learning policies; creating a policy for linguistic environment for foreign language acquisition; and developing an English proficiency test for RMUTL personnel and students. One participant identified that:

RMUTL should develop teaching and learning processes that support current, and new trends to help the students think critically, solve problems, and learn independently. The most important subjects and skills in the modern world are, Sciences, Technology, Math, foreign languages, and critical thinking skills.

In addition, one participant expressed *“we should support our new curricula and learning processes in the modern world, including the academic evaluation system, which must be tied to the students’ achievements”*. However, one participant mentioned that: *“All employees, both academics, and administrative must pass an English test, such as TOFEL, IELTS, or at least TOEIC. We have to set up some standards for this test, and let all employees have it”*. Accordingly, one participant stated that *“another policy that can enhance the internationalization of RMUTL is the announcement of the use of English language as a medium of instruction. All text books, Power Point, and other resources must be in English language”*. Pama (2012) described policies and projects required to respond to globalization as follows: English as the dominant language, standards required to assess unnecessary foreign qualifications, teaching, and learning curriculum.

RMUTL Strengths

Based on the participants’ opinions in this study, RMUTL has a considerable number of strengths, as described on the following comments. For example, *“Rajamangala Lanna is in a strategic location, and the name of the province itself is very attractive to many people because of the Lanna culture in Thailand”*. Another strength involves, *“We have six campuses located in six provinces in Northern Thailand, and this is another strength that we can benefit from it a lot”*. RMUTL is a large public university in Northern Thailand with a total of 2,260 employees, 1,288 of whom are instructors, 972, administrative employees, and 22,671 students in all six campuses (Human Resource Department of RMUTL, 2012). Similarly, *“I think the uniqueness of RMUTL is the suffix name that is called “Lanna”, which refers to the greatness of Lanna Kingdom in the past or in Ancient Thailand. Lanna has its own language, culture, and traditions”*. Another strength that distinguishes RMUTL from other universities was expressed as follows:

the strengths of RMUTL, which can attract foreign students, in particular, are arts, and culture, or the Faculty of Arts and Architecture. We have Lanna architectures in RMUTL, and when people talk about Lanna arts, and culture, it is a must to think of RMUTL only.

RMUTL is famous by producing graduates with practical skills, and responding to the labor market needs. Another strength of RMUTL is that we produce graduates with skills in various professions, as stated in the university’s vision. This makes many employers in Thailand prefer to recruit our students in their organizations.

All in all, one participant noted that:

At present, the Faculty of Arts and Architecture is considered one of the main strengths of RMUTL. We are a leading university in painting, sculpture, and arts. Many public, and private organizations were built by the Lanna way, and most of which were constructed by our lecturers, and students. I think if we

develop a new curriculum that emphasizes the Lanna arts and architecture, it will attract a lot of foreign students, who are interested in Lanna arts.

Other strengths discussed were: academic mobility programs; worldwide networks, and connections; vocational and hands-on university; ability to publish research in international venues; a leading university in painting, sculpture, and arts; adequate staff, and professional academics; and RMUTL is ranked the first among the nine RMUT in Thailand. These were clarified as follows: “*we have exchange student and staff projects. We allow our students and lecturers to study and work in other workplaces to get more experience*”. Besides, “*RMUTL has worldwide connections with universities. For example, in native English speaking countries, America, Canada, and New Zealand. Also, in the ASEAN Community, we have students, and staff exchange programs*”. Similarly, “*to enhance our weaknesses, we made some agreements with countries that are more effective than us, such as Korea, Japan, China, India, New Zealand, and Australia*”

Other critical strengths were identified by the participants of this study, such as special courses; community service, strong commitment to CSR, and society; and our capability to develop internationalization policies. Similarly, Henson et al. (1990) mentioned that public service functions of a university are essential to enhance its relevance in an interdependent community. In the reviewed literature, it is found that the Blueprint for the ASEAN socio-cultural community (2009) discussed the significance of promoting CSR, and ensures that it is incorporated in the corporate agenda and contributes towards sustainable socio-economic development in ASEAN member nations.

International Relations Office

When asked the participants of this study about the significant role of the international relations office in the ASEAN era, rich information was provided. For example, actively inviting institutions in RMUTL; enhance cooperation, serve as a liaison between RMUTL and the ASEAN universities; strive for excellence; network expansion plans; capacity building, develop joint degree programs and seminars, coordinate international projects, and strengthen international environmental treaties. Hence, one comment was: “*the office of international affairs is an academic support unit, and its mission is to support the creation of an international policy and development to reach specific quality and standards that can help us become an excellence university*”. Delegation of authority and responsibility; and become the central unit of RMUTL were also suggestions explicitly expressed by the participants, as follows:

The foreign affairs office is an important tool. It is unnecessary to be dependent on other offices. I mean, this office should be an executive power. I would like to stress that the foreign affairs office is just a tool, but if you do not use the tool effectively, some things may not happen as we planned for it.

The participants, however, viewed that delegation and empowerment for the leader of this department is essential to manage things appropriately, and assists RMUTL in internationalizing all its processes. Nevertheless,

the international relations office in our university is very small, and the leader of this department does not have any power or authority to make decisions or make any order. Currently, we have the Deputy President responsible for the international relations office.

The international relations office should, “*collect all international activities from each faculty, and in my opinion, this work must be the work of the Vice President of International Affairs to have the power, and the authority to make orders, and decisions in RMUTL*”. Additionally, this office can help RMUTL in, “*developing action plans, coordinating different projects, cooperating with*

foreign universities, searching for scholarships, providing training courses, developing research, and exchanging programs for staff, students, and faculty members”.

Hence, delegation of authority and responsibility for the international relations office/department, and become the central unit of the university were considered major addition to previous studies.

Curricula

Moving to another interesting issue, which is related to curriculum issues, several answers were mentioned by the participants, such as English language becoming a medium of instruction; incorporating the ASEAN aspects of life into our curricula; intellectual challenges of a curriculum for excellence; highlighting production practices in the curriculum; satisfying market needs; developing practical and global curricula; incorporating a mixture of the most required competencies in today's market into our curricula; developing a competitive curriculum; strengthening core values by offering Human Relations' subjects in the core courses; the curriculum: theory, and practice; defining clear goals with reflection on the skills required for our learners; consistency, and clear objectives; and a curriculum that reflects 21st century skills, and the modern world. Hence, the participants of this study expressed their ideas as follows: *“Now we are having our curricula in Thai language, which meets the Thai Qualifications Framework (TQF). Suppose that each curriculum contains 120 credits, one/ fourth of the curriculum should be taught in English. This can enhance the internationalization”.* Erling and Hilgendorf (2006, p.287) showed that *“English appears to function as a cure-all for the ills in the German education system. At the same time, the impact of the increasing use of English in German higher education is rarely considered”.* In addition, *“the course contents should cover all objectives in the curriculum. In the context of the ASEAN Community, in my opinion, the course must offer knowledge about the ASEAN ways of life, including language, culture, traditions, and political issues”.* The participants noted that at present, RMUTL is trying to develop all its curricula, establish bilingual programs, and cooperate with industries.

Technology Applications

Some different competencies, programs, and activities considered influential for internationalizing RMUTL were proposed by this study's participants: computer software programs; Executive Information System (EIS); effective use of Information Systems (ISs) to carry out the planned tasks; the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in all RMUTL activities; and success factors and impacts of Information Technology (IT) applications. The participants formulated these competencies by the following:

We have to use IT, and manage the use of technology to enhance our teaching skills. For example, in teaching English, we use the English software program that is called “Tell Me More” (TMM), and QUARTET software program for officers.

Moreover, the participants mentioned that:

Executive information system (EIS) is necessary to support the management in key planning policies, and strategies. The EIS will be used to guide management decisions. Also, semi-structured EIS can be developed to meet the executives' special needs both in and out RMUTL.

It was perceived that *“IT can help internationalizing RMUTL, especially in E-Book system to search for a variety of information in English; however, the barrier is that our students use this technology very little”.* Knight, Adams, and Peace Lenn (1999) acknowledged that the fast development of IT is directly affecting higher education systems. Other comments articulated that:

It is important to develop our ISs to support our instructors, students, strategic planners, and management in a variety of issues. For example, ISs can provide some tools or information to measure the effectiveness of our staff, and our educational courses to become an international university.

ICT helps the whole world connects and communicates with each other effectively. Hence, ICT should be applied to facilitate all administrative works, such as the registration system, timetables, meetings, and Videoconferencing, monitoring, and controlling through the use of the technological system.

Speeding Up the Process

The participants of this study emphasized other factors to speed up the internationalization of RMUTL in the ASEAN Community era. For instance, seeking high-quality instructors, both native, and non-native English speakers; strengthen foreign languages' competencies, strategies, and tools; boost 3+1 programs, MOUs, networks, PR projects, study abroad projects, and marketing plans. Based on that, the participants articulated their thoughts as follows:

I think we should start on matters, such as quality teachers. Do we have qualified teachers? who can be the same or better than teachers in other universities in the ASEAN countries? The answer is that there is no one can answer this question.

In the participants' opinions, "*English teachers must have appropriate teaching methods to let our students learn how to search for knowledge independently, and how to present their ideas. This is more important than just teaching English tenses for a conversation*". Nevertheless, it was argued that:

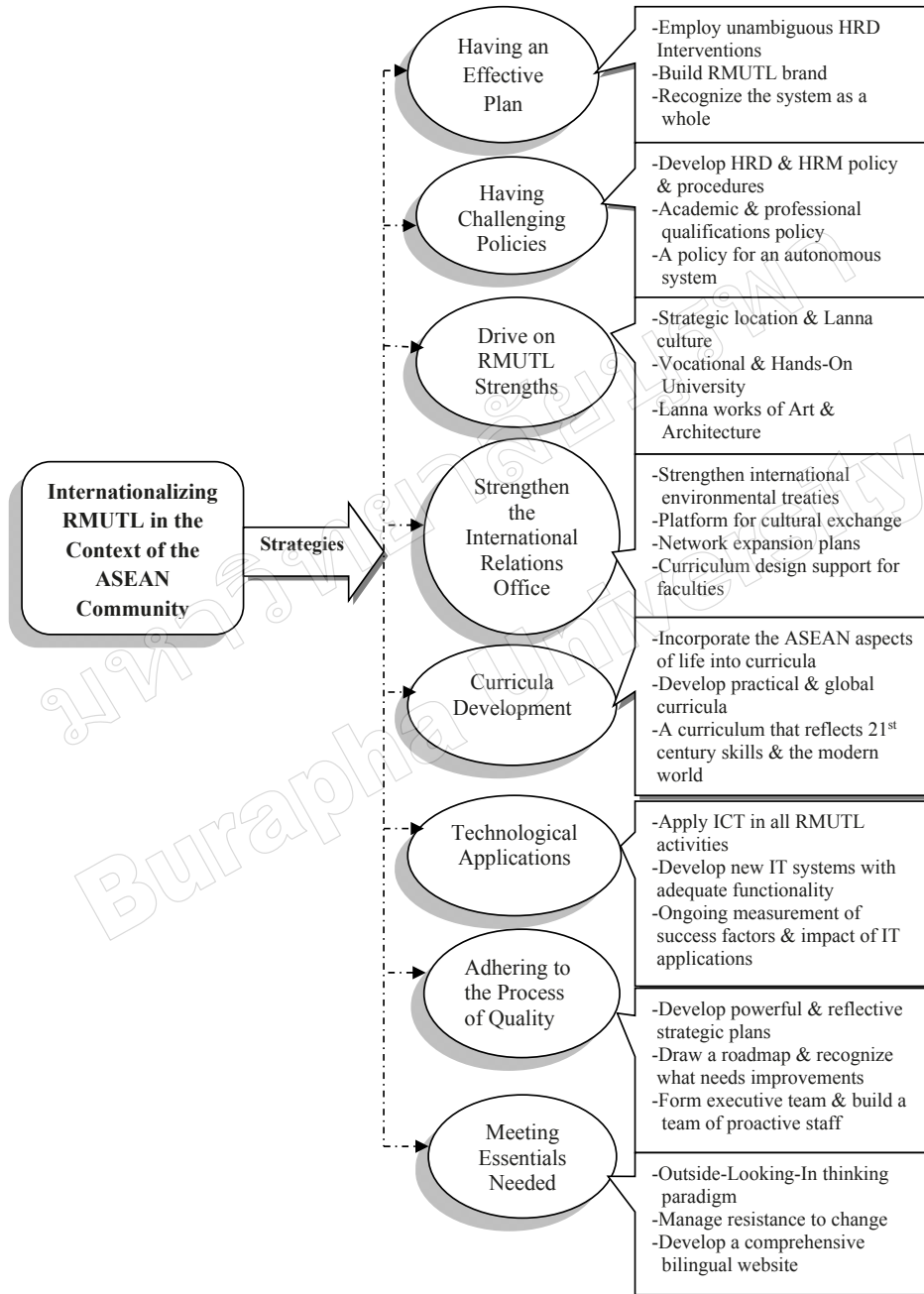
If we hire ordinary instructors with low salaries, we will suffer from the low quality of education. The barrier is that we get limited budget from the government. Also, the government allows low income for foreign instructors. In order to overcome this problem, the university should give more salaries to foreign instructors from the university's own budget. RMUTL has already done Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with many universities, and corporations. For example, we have MOUs with Chongqing University in China, and Central Group Retail Company in Thailand, which support students in their tuition fees. The university will develop all courses provided to allow the students to go to the shops of Central Group some days, and study in the university some other days.

In the study of Fogelberg (1999), it is recommended that global networks be considered a prominent method of maintaining an advanced education level and research, and of preserving international presence. Another significant issue was that, "*RMUTL websites should respond to all students' inquiries. Websites should present clear information, and invite those who are interested in studying at RMUTL*". Similarly, the participants commented that, developing a powerful, and reflective strategic plan; communicating the internationalization policy for all individuals in RMUTL; becoming a research university, having national and international research publications; drawing a roadmap, and recognizing what needs improvements; sufficient budget, and support from all executives to invest in RMUTL; careful selection process; and determining how fast we want to go are all important aspects to speed up the internationalization of RMUTL.

Essentials

Moving to the last issue, the researcher attempted to look at the essentials for internationalizing RMUTL in the ASEAN Community era. Based on that, the participants talked about the essentials in their views as follows: outside-looking-in paradigm; exceptional IT competencies, strong partnership with the media, and become a famous university; develop our academics' capabilities, and skills; strive to recruit high intellectuals, retain them, and develop an effective compensation system; quality criteria for curriculum design and development; deal and manage resistance to change; innovative strategies for developing English skills across the university; reward policy for outstanding students in English languages; develop RMUTL personnel competencies, and mindsets; and consider the use of a foreign language in teaching. Thus, the participants addressed that: "*Outside-Looking-In to adapt and adopt many things for our organization is very essential*". Alongside, "*develop strong partnership with the media, and become accepted and well-known by other organizations*". Another strong comment made by the participants, "*Thai people try to conserve the use of the Thai language with no doubt, but actually it is necessary to consider the use of another language that may help in communicating with different people in the ASEAN Community*". Other participants added: balancing the paradox of localization and internationalization; developing powerful strategic plans; center for contemporary critical & cultural studies ; creating a positive attitude towards all kinds of work; creating a competitive workforce and environment; strategies to promote the development of student competencies; meditation and mindfulness; educating students social work skills and competencies required in today's global world; students' cross-cultural competencies; promoting peace and prosperity in the region and maintaining long-term connection stability; developing expansive information gathering system and educational networks; effective and transparent management; autonomous center for all ASEAN works, projects and activities; and developing a comprehensive bilingual website.

A Proposed Model for Internationalizing RMUTL in the Context of the ASEAN Community



Source: Generated by Kanwara Somjai, 2014.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Higher education institutions considerably vary in their level of understanding of what constitutes an international university. Therefore, this offers great opportunities for researchers to investigate a plethora of critical issues related to the topic. There are relatively few investigations of the degree of internationalization of higher education institutions in the ASEAN era. One area of study could be related to drawbacks, and new risks of internationalizing higher education institutions in the ASEAN era. Comparative case studies regarding the topic of internationalization, what it means, and how it can be implemented in different socio-economic and cultural contexts would be another interesting research area. We also need to expand our level of understanding of the internationalization issue by including legal and economic factors involved in a system. Another intriguing area of research could be related to the level and the capacity of individuals in facing crises in the ASEAN era.

Conclusion

Decision-makers and policy-makers in higher education institutions in ASEAN countries should investigate a variety of aspects to minimize risks involved in any process, activity, project or plan to internationalize their education system. There is no 'one size fits all' model of higher education development (Mohrman, Ma & Baker, 2008). Despite the frequent lack of a precise definition, the term internationalization is often used to refer to one or a combination of the following activities: (1) the international movement of students and staff between countries; (2) internationalization of higher education curricula; (3) international links for research and open learning programs; and (4) bilateral, regional and international recognition of higher education qualifications (Harman, 2004).

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