

# The Transition of Thai Public Universities from Bureaucratic System to Self-autonomy: An Approach to Quality Improvement\*

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## 1. Introduction

The administration of higher education in Thailand is now facing challenges, which have impacts on quality of overall higher education. The first challenge is the effect of economic downturn in 1997 resulting in financial shortage of the Thai government. The second is the Thai constitution of 1997, which stipulates that the government must provide 12 years of basic education with free of charge. This implies that the flow of high school graduates will be doubled in the near future. The last challenge is the government's policy to move all public comprehensive universities out of bureaucratic system.

The Commission on Higher Education

under the Ministry of Education has played the role as supervisory and supporting body for educational development. One project highlight is the increase in management efficiency of public higher education institutions. The government sets two key measures to enhance flexibility and efficiency in management. The first is the preparation for the remaining 20 public comprehensive universities to be autonomous in the near future. The block grant and post auditing system are set up to increase financial autonomy. The University Council of each public university will be assigned increasing vital roles in university academic and management

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decisions. The second is preparation in terms of internal management system which has to be flexible and accountable; amendments of financial rules and regulations; and personnel to be in the new autonomous system.

This paper aims to elaborate the facts, principles and experiences for Thai public universities in the time of transition from bureaucratic system to become self-autonomy. This paper also reviews the problems of Thai higher education and provides answers to some questions that are often asked about autonomous universities.

## 2. Categories of Thai Higher Education Institutions

There are eight categories of higher education institutions in Thailand. These are public comprehensive universities under bureaucratic system, autonomous public universities, open public universities, the Rajabhat Universities, the Rajamangala Universities of Technology, private universities, public vocational colleges and private colleges. All except private universities and private colleges operate on a budget allocated by the government. However, this section will focus on higher education institutions which offer four-year programs of study leading to a bachelor's degree. It leaves out both public and private vocational colleges, which offer two-year study programs leading to a vocational diploma.

### 2.1 Public Comprehensive Universities under Bureaucratic System

This category consists of 18 public

comprehensive universities which include the following: 1) Chulalongkorn University, chartered in 1917; 2) Thammasat University, chartered in 1933; 3) Mahidol University, chartered in 1943; 4) Kasetsart University, chartered in 1943; 5) Silpakorn University, chartered in 1943; 6) Chiangmai University, chartered in 1964; 7) Khon Kaen University, chartered in 1964; 8) National Institute of Development Administration, chartered in 1966; 9) Prince of Songkla University, chartered in 1967; 10) King Mongkut's Institute of Technology at Ladkrabang, chartered in 1971; 11) King Mongkut's Institute of Technology at North Bangkok, chartered in 1971; 12) Srinakharinwirot University, chartered in 1974; 13) Maejoe University, chartered in 1975; 14) Burapha University, chartered in 1990; 15) Naresuen University, chartered in 1990; 16) Ubon Ratchathani University, chartered in 1990; 17) Mahasarakham University, chartered in 1994; and 18) Thaksin University, chartered in 1996. These universities mainly admit those high school students who pass the highly competitive national entrance examination. However, individual university has its own policy to admit high school students to study in any special degree programs with direct admission. Each university has its own charter and is considered a governmental office at the departmental level under the Ministry of Education and is funded largely by the government budget.

### 2.2 Public Universities with Self-autonomy

At present, four autonomous public universities are included in this category. These universities can autonomously manage their financial resources and administrative affair.

Furthermore, they are funded largely by the government. Suranaree University of Technology, chartered in 1990, is the first public university in this category to operate independently from the government bureaucracy with its own autonomous administrative system and with government financial support in the form of block grants. Walailak University, the second of its kind, was set up in 1988. King Mongkut's University of Technology at Thonburi was also changed its status to be an autonomous university in 1988. Mae Fah Luang University, another autonomous university, is established in 1999.

### 2.3 Open Public Universities under Bureaucratic System

There are two open universities in Thailand. Both are public institutions funded by the government. The curricula offered are mostly in the social science disciplines. Ramkhamhaeng University and Sukhothai Thammathirat University were chartered in 1971 and 1979 respectively. These two universities provide an effective and economic way to respond to the growing public demand for access to higher education. Both make use of modern technology such as radio and television to broadcast tutorials to a wider audience.

### 2.4 Rajabhat Universities

Rajabhat Universities were upgraded from former Rajabhat Institutes in 2004. Rajabhat Institutes emerged from the original 36 Teacher Training Colleges in 1995. The Act of 1995 designed the institutional structure,

administration, and autonomy of 36 Rajabhat Institutes as well as the office of Rajabhat Institutes Council. The number of campuses has increased and in 2001, there were 41 campuses in different parts of the country. A legislation being processed by the Parliament in 2004 made individual campus become 41 individual universities under the same name.

### 2.5 The Rajamangala Universities of Technology

In 1989 twenty-eight public technical and commercial colleges under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Education were legally merged and became the Rajamangala Institute of Technology. Each original college became a campus of the new Institute of Technology. In 2005, the Rajamangala Institute of Technology was upgraded by the Act of Parliament to become 9 individual universities around the country.

### 2.6 Private Universities

These institutions were established and funded by private resources according to the 2003 Act of Private Higher Education Institutions. Currently, there are about 50 private higher education institutions.

The proportion of students classified by categories of higher education institutions is illustrated in Figure 1, while the proportion of graduates classified by categories of higher education institutions being illustrated in Figure 2.

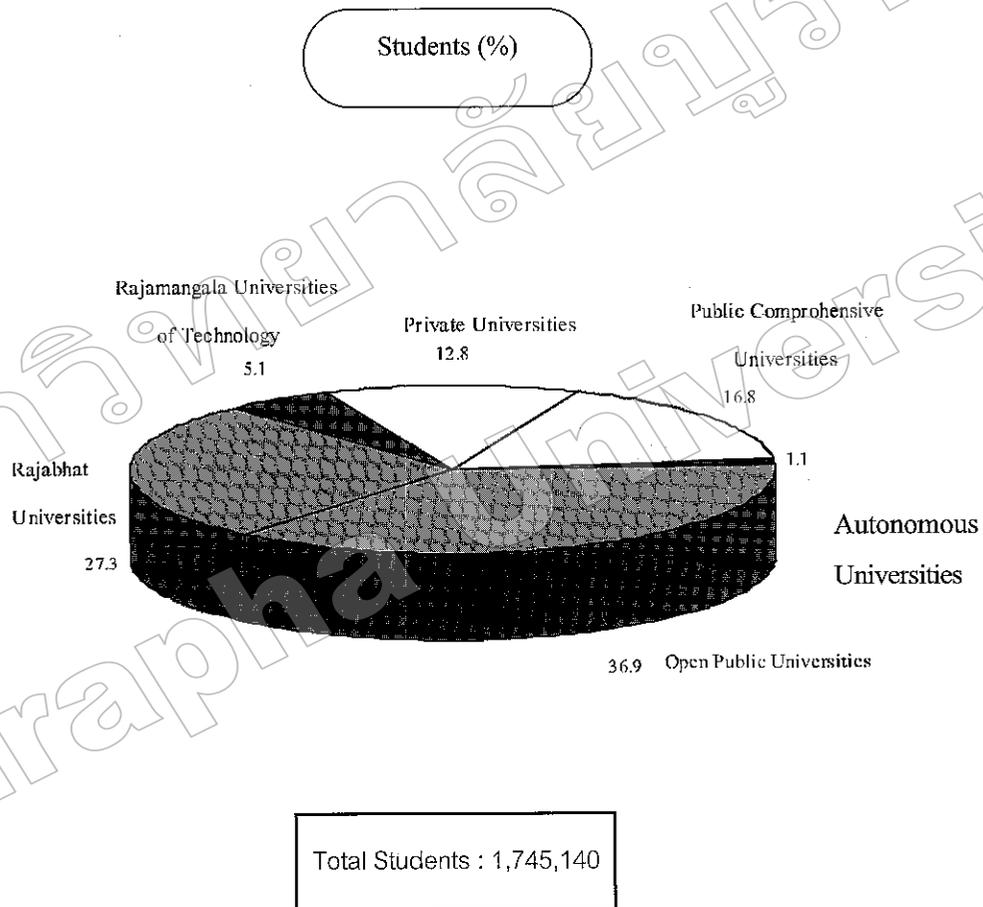


Figure 1 Proportion of Students Classified by Categories of Higher Education Institutes (4-Year Courses), Academic Year 2001 (Weesakul et al., 2004, p. 8)

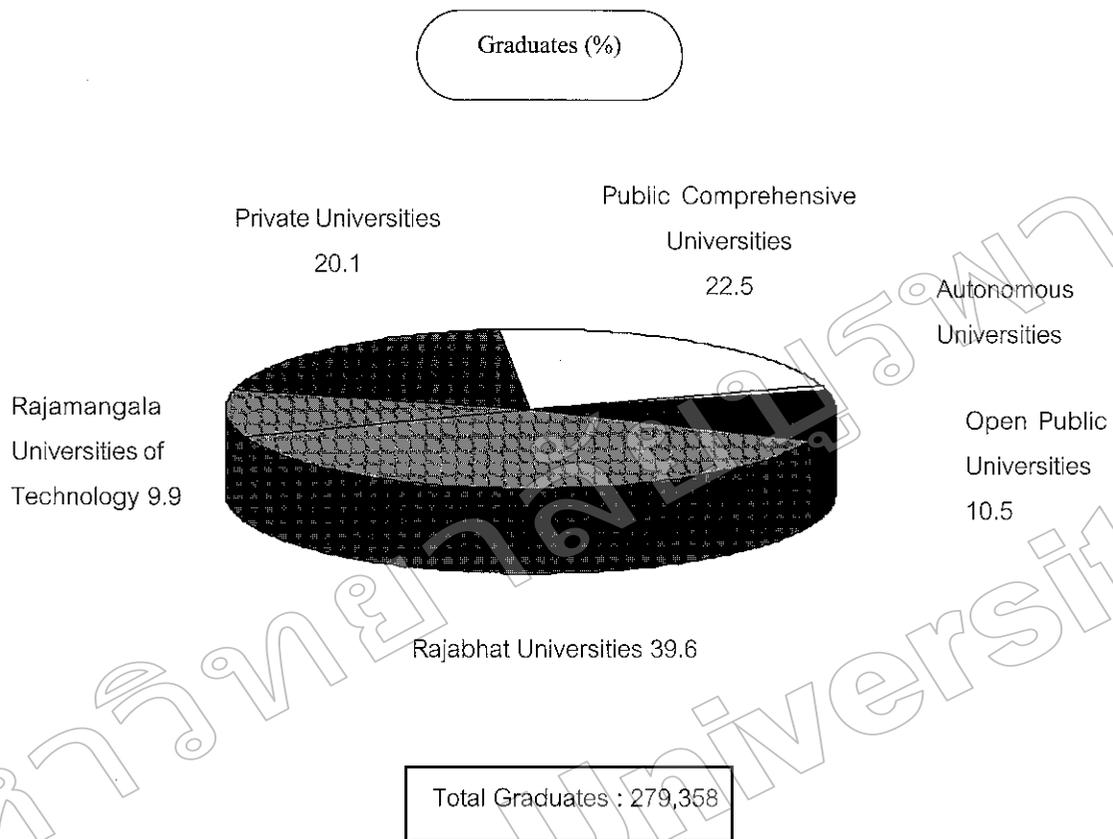


Figure 2 Proportion of Graduates Classified by Categories of Higher Education Institutes (4-Year Courses), Academic Year 2001 (Weesakul et al., 2004, p.9)

It is clear that Thai government has intentionally implemented one of educational strategies for reforming structure and managerial system of higher education. Public universities under the categories 2.1 and 2.3 are in the legislative process for transforming their status from bureaucratic system to autonomous one. The drafted Acts of 14 out of 20 public universities in these categories are underway and would be scrutinized by the Parliament. The drafted Acts of first five public universities including Chiangmai University, Khon Kaen University, Burapha University, Mahasarakham

University, and Thaksin University, will be soon scrutinized by the Parliament in the next convening session.

### 3. Problems in the Quality of Thai Higher Education System

In the ranking of higher education institutions in 49 countries by the Institute of Management Development (IMD), Thailand ranks 47<sup>th</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> in the overall competitiveness of education system and quality of higher education respectively, while universities in

Singapore and Taiwan come 4<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> respectively in the university education ranking. Boonserm Weesakul et al. (2004, pp. 16-21) clarifies various causes which contribute to lower quality of Thai higher education. Some causes will be discussed here.

### **3.1 Government subsidy is unfair and inadequate**

Government has invested a lot of money to public universities much more than private higher education institutions. Seventy-five percent of the operating cost of public university comes from the government budget, while the rest, 25%, comes from tuition and fees. On the other hand, government's subsidy to private universities is minimal. Therefore, tuition and fees of private universities are about three to five times higher than that of public universities. This has led to inefficiency and ineffectiveness of financial management system and unfair advantage over private universities in the market share of prospective students. Nevertheless, the government budget is not adequate. The larger part is spent on maintaining the operation of the institution. About 30 percent of the budget is spent each year in constructing new buildings and acquiring new equipment. The low tuition and fees of public universities are not sufficient for quality improvement and academic excellence.

### **3.2 Uneven distribution of high quality students**

The competitive national screening and selection process gives more advantages to high school students from more affluent families for admission into more prestigious public

universities. Their families are willing to afford the expenses for tutoring schools in order to pass the competitive entrance examination. Furthermore, current undergraduate students have different educational background. In general, all universities recruit not only graduates from secondary schools, but also those who graduate from vocational institutions and those from non-formal educational system.

### **3.3 Unbalanced growth of university students**

The expansion of university students is increasing annually about 5 percent. The decade between 1991- 2000 showed the expansion of university students by 7 percent a year. The increasing number of students can be easily observed in the field of social sciences at both open universities and Rajabhat universities. However, the growth is accompanied by intakes of lower quality, which eventually result in either low success rate or low quality graduates.

### **3.4 Poor remuneration for university teaching staff**

The low salary scale is paid to most university faculty members which forces them to seek extra income through additional work off campus or through the teaching of extra classes in addition to their weekly 10-12 hours workload. Many of them teach as many as 18-20 hours per week. An average salary of a Ph.D. holder in a state university is about US\$ 240 per month. Those who have obtained a full professorship can earn a monthly salary about US\$ 1,500. The base salary scales of faculty members in the same or different disciplines are generally equal. The salaries of faculty members might vary due to extra

income emanated from special programs.

### 3.5 Lack of interest in research

Most faculty members are not interested in conducting research. One explanation is the fact that research is not tenure requirement. Since most faculty members are government officials, they are required to teach at minimum workload. Research funds are scarcely available for new researchers.

## 4. Constraints of Public Universities under the Bureaucratic System

University administration has long been tied to government bureaucratic system in terms of budget and personnel management, finance and logistics. The administration has proceeded under the supervision and control specified by general government regulations practiced by governmental departments and divisions.

The bureaucratic practices always follow the rules and regulations that are in conflict with university administration which requires flexibility, versatility and swiftness in operations in order to bring about change and respond directly to academic advances. Personnel management has also been plagued with problems especially the inability to attract good and well qualified persons into the universities. In other words, public universities are unable to maintain qualified persons, unable to attract capable people from outside and difficult to dismiss inadequate ones. Fair remuneration has also not been possible as long as personnel still maintain their status as government officials. Problems concerning fiscal, asset and budgetary management,

including that of logistics, all seem to have been intensely confined in terms of practice. From time to time, it has often been proposed that universities should have their own systems and regulations with regard to fiscal, assets and logistical matters. The prevailing complaint has therefore been that if universities were not part of the bureaucracy, management would be far more flexible and efficient as well.

The inflexibility as well as rules and regulations that regulate the major framework for bureaucratic administration have constantly been ascribed as the cause of the inefficient management of universities. It has contributed to critical constraints faced by universities in carrying out their tasks which also includes the quality of graduates and research produced; both of which are considered to be their main missions.

As long as universities remain in the government bureaucratic system it would be difficult to solve such deeply rooted inefficiencies which are multi-faceted and impossible to be tackled since a solution to one problem often causes a chain of effects. A prime example is in the salary structure where attempts have long been made to adjust to a more realistic scale.

Solutions to the problems of inflexibility and inefficiency in higher education administration had to be addressed by separating the entire university administrative system from the government bureaucratic system. Then universities could be granted authorities to handle all administrative and management matters. This would provide

autonomy and independence for the institutions to fully develop and manage themselves in accordance with their institutional philosophies and objectives. Nevertheless, though no longer within the government system, they would still remain directly connected to the public sector by maintaining the status of a state agency as had previously been the case with the exception that their administration and monitoring systems are independent in all aspects.

## 5. Principles of the Autonomous University

Under a bureaucratic system, the administration of any public universities must conform to a uniform set of rules and regulations applicable to all government offices. A set system of control monitoring is in the same way as budget allocation and fiscal management stipulated for all types of government spending. Most importantly, the system of personnel management is consistent throughout the country.

Therefore, autonomous university would have different meaning and operation as well as less governmental control and supervision. Government supervision will mostly be concerned with direction of policy, budget allocation and quality control. Instead greater emphasis will be placed on follow-up and assessment of operations to ensure greater transparency.

### 5.1 The Status of Autonomous University

The guiding principles of autonomous university will maintain this status and the following characteristics: 1) enjoy the status of a

government agency that is not within the government bureaucracy and not a state enterprise; 2) become legal entity under state supervision; and 3) continue to be a state agency that still receives the allocation of national budget according to the Budget Procedure Act in order to assure the quality of education it delivers.

### 5.2 Autonomy

The administrative independence will be guaranteed in the governing Acts of each university. The University Council of individual university is able to freely devise rules and regulations regarding its administrative authority within the framework of its governing Act. Most of its internal administrative matters will be dealt with by the University Council except for matters that need to be brought to the attention of higher authority.

### 5.3 Personnel Administration

The principles for the administration of personnel in autonomous university include the following features: 1) university staff will have the status of university personnel and fall under the university's regulations overruling personnel administration; 2) during the transitional period of system changes, there will be assessments of each individual performance so that recruitment of university personnel can take place. Each institution may determine its own guidelines and criteria for recruitment; 3) salaries and remuneration will be paid according to principles of assessment and salary rates stipulated by the University Council; 4) the University Council will formulate rules and regulations overruling personnel administration that are fair to

personnel of each individual institution, which will differ from each other accordingly; and 5) welfare and benefits will be stipulated by each individual University Council.

#### 5.4 Budget and Assets

The principles concerning budgets and assets of autonomous university are as follows: 1) government provides block grant to university sufficient to guarantee quality of education it delivers. This block grant will be considered as university's own income; 2) university must stipulate its own system of budget, accounting and finance and assets management. The State Audit Office will subsequently post auditing its accounts and follow up on its budget expenditure; 3) the income of each university needs not be transmitted to the Ministry of Finance according to the laws regarding treasury reserves and laws concerning budget procedures; 4) in case where income generated is insufficient to sustain the university's operation and funds can not be procured from other sources, the government should allocate additional funds from the national budget; 5) the University can hold ownership rights to its property and assets; 6) the university has the right to manage, maintain, use and benefits from property owned by the state property; 7) assets derived from donors or purchased with the university's income should be considered as property owned by the university; and 8) the income generated by university from various sources should be utilized as additional resource to strengthen its academic capacity considerably.

#### 5.5 Administration of Academic Affairs

The administration of the autonomous university's academic affairs will conform mainly to the principles of academic freedom with most matters handled by the University Council. However, academic performance must be in line with the policies and proceed according to standards stipulated by the central authority. Guidelines will be as follows: 1) the University Council has authority to approve academic curriculum and courses offered in accordance with the standards and plans stipulated by the Ministry of Education; 2) the University Council has authority to approve, establish, terminate and cancel various units in the university to ensure the greatest efficiency; and 3) the university is responsible for development of quality assurance procedures in conformation with the policies of the Ministry of Education.

#### 5.6 Supervision and Monitoring

Some types of accountability must be processed through internal and external authorities. Each university must develop a system of monitoring and inspection for the benefit of institution's internal administration. The University Council is the highest authority responsible to the government for university's performance.

External monitoring and inspection is part of the State's monitoring system carried out by related agencies such as the State Audit Office, the Ministry of Education and Bureau of the Budget. The Ministry of Education and the Bureau of the Budget direct and monitor university administration through budgetary procedures by improving the system of budget allocation using performance results as the

criteria. The Ministry of Education must encourage all universities to formulate a system to ensure that their quality meets the standards stipulated. Therefore, results of operations within quality assurance system will directly affect administration which might be in need of improvement.

## 6. Lessons Learned from Autonomous Universities in Thailand

Krissanapong Kirtikara who is the first president of King Mongkut's University of Technology at Thonburi (KMUTT) has elaborated achievement and unfinished work he experienced as follows.

### 6.1 What have been achieved?

According to Krissanapong Kirtikara (2004, pp. 60-62), KMUTT has established a foundation and a system of administration for the university to reach its visions together with its stakeholders. KMUTT has surmounted the psychological barrier of civil servants that are normally passive to problems and tend to wait for external input for problem solving and prevention. The KMUTT's personnel now become proactive in directing and correcting the system. The KMUTT's personnel have demonstrated their potential and innovation have resulted in cost reduction, sense of saving, higher productivity, within the increasing constraints of diminishing government support per student. Awareness on quality and cost effectiveness are abounding. Technical outputs increase. Revenues and assets of university increase.

The KMUTT's recruitment has become more open. Competent outsiders can

become senior administrators at all levels from department chairmen upwards to deans and president. The KMUTT has cultivated the new working culture with its stakeholders, especially with its alumni, the private sector and the public. Furthermore, KMUTT's personnel are confident in and accept its system of monitoring and evaluation of individuals and organizations. The results of evaluation are use for improvement

### 6.2 The unfinished work

According to Krissanapong Kirtikara (2004, pp. 63-65), autonomous universities do not work in isolation from other existing government agencies within the bureaucracy. These agencies in some way control operation of autonomous universities. The principal ones are the Bureau of the Budget, Ministry of Finance, the Office of State Auditor, and the Office of the Civil Services. These agencies are unfamiliar with autonomous agencies and tend to apply the normal procedures dealing with civil service agencies to autonomous ones.

There must be mechanisms and incentives conducive to the development of the quality of academic programs, development of staff and establishment of good governance and management in autonomous universities.

Terry Frederickson (2002, pp. 55-63) published an article arguing that the prospect of autonomy has made many public universities uneasy, but Suranaree University of Technology (SUT) has survived quite nicely outside the government bureaucracy. According to Kasem Prabripataloong, the Vice President for Academic Affairs of SUT, it was possible for the university to adopt a competitive salary scale. SUT

was able to assemble a faculty that was the envy of many well-established universities. Almost 70 percent of the teaching staff hold PhD's with the remainder holding master's degrees, one of the best ratios of any university in Thailand. Furthermore, being autonomous, the university has been able to keep its building and equipment costs low and its non-teaching support staff to a minimum. According to the civil service system, SUT should have 600 staff. However, SUT employs only 200, only one third of what is normally employed at other state universities. Even though SUT pays double salary, it still costs less.

## 7. Some questions that are often asked about autonomous universities

### 7.1 What is the University Autonomy?

University autonomy does not mean that a university is independent from the government policy, directives and intervention. Also, university autonomy does not mean that the government no longer funds autonomous universities. University autonomy means that the government allows autonomous universities to manage its own 3 major internal affairs: 1) academic matters which include academic programs, university structure; 2) personnel matters which include personnel system, recruitment, remuneration, benefits; and 3) finance and budgets which include budget management and procurement system.

The government can direct, supervise, audit and evaluate autonomous universities. Autonomous universities have to follow government policy and the Minister in charge.

### 7.2 Will the government not fund autonomous universities?

The fact is that autonomous universities are still public universities. To be autonomous is in essence to be free from bureaucratization. Being public universities entitles autonomous universities to be publicly financed, be responsive to government policy and is subject to auditing and evaluation by the government. The extent of public finance and support depends on ability of the government to finance higher education.

### 7.3 Do students pay more money in autonomous universities?

The 1999 National Education Act puts great emphasis on education and learning of the population. The compulsory education is 9 years whereas the basic education is 12 years and free of charge. In addition, the education reform requires more money on basic education infrastructure and salary of teachers at that level. With every thing being equal, this means that more budget will be spent on basic education, while less will be spent on higher education.

It is generally accepted that higher education is both public and private goods. However, private returns on higher education are larger than public returns. Therefore, expenses on higher education must be shared by the students who benefits and the public. It is evident that nowadays in Thailand public subsidy for higher education will diminish. Users will have to pay more. All public universities, whether bureaucratic system or autonomous ones, receive government budget not enough to maintain quality education. They offer special

programs that tuition and fees are higher than regular program. Special programs have been a normal practice of all public universities to raise fees and use the additional money to run the normal operation. Therefore, higher tuition and fees have nothing to do with university autonomy.

#### 7.4 Will staff be easily dismissed?

It is always alleged that there will be unfair and biased evaluation in autonomous universities, staff can be easily dismissed. The employment will be no longer secure, depending on the judgment of supervisors. This belief and misunderstanding have arisen from witnessing foul plays in some bureaucratic agencies and extrapolate it to autonomous universities. Some believe that autonomous universities are under a absolute control of senior administrators. In fact, foul plays have nothing to do with an agency whether being autonomous or bureaucratic. It depends mainly on the quality of members of that community.

The Thai society is becoming more opened and subjected to increasing scrutiny. The principle of good governance will ensure that autonomous university personnel will be evaluated on merits and capability.

#### 7.5 Will autonomous university personnel get higher salaries?

Compensation and rewards should depend on the efficiency and achievements of that person and his organization. If salaries of personnel in autonomous universities are high, that means they are efficient and perform well according to specific rules and sound evaluation. It must be accepted that to develop a good university, personnel must be of quality.

The atmosphere must be conducive to good working and output-oriented. Personnel must be dedicated to the work, not worried about finding extra income to raise his family.

## 8. Conclusion

Thai higher education institutions that offer four-year degree programs can be grouped into 6 categories. They differ in the quality of their graduates. In general, public comprehensive universities produce the best quality of graduates since their students have been competitively selected through national admission tests. The competition is due to limited seat and low tuition and fees of these public universities. The different types of higher education institutions also differ in their tuition and fees. Private universities are notable in terms of high tuition and fees collected from students. To cover the operation cost, their tuition and fees, which vary from university to university, are higher than those of public universities are. This is because public universities, whether within bureaucratic system or with self-autonomy, are financially supported by the government.

Therefore, individual universities in different categories differ in the per head cost of graduates. Cost per head of public comprehensive universities under bureaucratic system is about US\$ 2,500 per year. The student's success is almost guaranteed. In an open university, where admission is unlimited, the cost per head is only US\$ 120 per year, but one out of 18 of their students succeed in graduating. Cost per head of Rajabhat Universities is about US\$ 500 per year and the



shoulder more real costs of their education.

The other side argues that the market force would threaten academic quality and performance. That is because all public universities must compete with each other to earn more financial support instead of improving academic strength. University personnel must work to maximize profit.

No matter what the reasons are, without the transparency and accountability of university administration regarding social contract to exchange money from tax players, all public universities with the new status as autonomous universities might be able to continue playing inactive role in national higher education.

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