US-China Education Review B 3 (2011) 370-381 Earlier title: US-China Education Review, ISSN 1548-6613



# Emerging Trends of Thai Higher Education and a Case Study of Shinawatra University in Coping With Global Challenges

## Kantatip Sinhaneti Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

This paper will firstly address the four underlying principles that govern the mission of Thai universities providing and promoting academic and professional education, promoting and conducting research and studies for generating new knowledge, providing public service and preserving and promoting arts, traditions and cultural heritage. This paper will then continue with the discussion of the emerging trends in Thai higher education. More commercialization, international cooperation and projects based on corporate social responsibility that can be seen in both private and government universities. Many new collaboration and many existing collaborations between higher education institutions and international agencies in the region are being formed and strengthened. Faculty and student exchange, the signing of MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) among Thai higher institutions and those outside the country, more international programs taught in English in many disciplines are prevalent in Thai universities. With the forthcoming education reform, the Ministry of Education expects that Thai higher institutions will play an active role both in the Asian region and in the world as an education hub, engage more in lifelong learning mandate and pay more attentions to their societal development and communities. This paper will end with a brief discussion of a case study of a private university, Shinawatra University, which has been established under the framework of global issues and new basic needs of universities in the globalized mindset. This university has taken seriously the issue of energy consumption as well as harmonizing natural surrounding and learning innovation as a basic philosophy throughout the design of its campus.

Keywords: trends in Thai higher education, university and the global challenge

#### Introduction

Komolmas (1999), one of the renowned educators in the university circle, gave a key word in depicting the current scenario of Thai higher education as "internationalization" by saying:

As we move towards a century of cooperation, internationalization of higher education is becoming an integral part of the education system itself... Such internationalization of higher education contributes to building more than economically competitive and politically powerful regional blocks: it represents a commitment to international solidarity, human security and helps to build a climate of global peace. (p. 10)

In contrast, Yavaprabhas (2008), another higher education educator used the word "commercialization" instead by stating that:

One of the changing norms in higher education is the commercialization or mechanization of higher education. This is

Kantatip Sinhaneti, Ph.D., associate professor, program director, Shinawatra University.

the direct impact of globalization on the core aspect of higher education. Higher education has now become a tradable good and service. Commercialization of higher education, in this way, has changed the role of HEIs (higher education institutions) from passive to pro-active knowledge producers, transmitters and disseminators beyond institutional and national boundaries. (pp. 3-5)

This so-called "internationalization" or "commercialization" in Thai higher education can be observed through five major evidences as following.

## **International Cooperation**

The Ministry of Education Thailand has endorsed many collaborations with other foreign countries in terms of education (CHE, 2008a). Evidences for joint cooperation from the Commission on Higher Education in 2005 have shown that many MOUs (Memorandum of Understandings) have been signed between Thai higher education institutions and foreign institutions. Fifty-eight Thai higher education institutions signed 583 MOUs with foreign counterparts. Forty-four Thai public higher education institutions signed 471 MOUs with foreign higher education institutions and international organizations, whereas 14 Thai private higher education institutions signed 112 MOUs. MOU from Asian region constitutes 48%, while MOU from Europe constitutes 19% and North America constitutes 15%. As an individual country, USA has the highest number of MOU (93 MOUs), China has 68 MOUs and Japan has 65 MOUs. For state universities, education is the most popular field of cooperation accounting for 45 MOUs. Agriculture accounts for 38 MOUs, while engineering and science have 22 MOUs for each. Humanities field has the least number of MOU, 21MOUs. As a result of these MOUs, international cooperation at the tertiary level can be grouped into three types:

- (1) Double degree program, many Thai universities both state and private offer double degrees with their partner institutions abroad. For example, Silpakorn University and Perpignan University from France, Institute Vatel in Hotel and Tourism Management; Kasetsart University and Victoria University of Technology in Tropical Agriculture and International Trade;
- (2) Joint degree program or cooperation in terms of faculty/staff exchange, student exchange. For example, Sasin Graduate Institute of Business Administration of Chulalongkorn University and Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and the University of Pensylvania's Wharton School of Business, MBA (Master of Business Administration) and HRM (Human Resource Management); King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang and RMIT (The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) University, Melbourne;
- (3) Extension of universities from abroad, many international universities are established in Thailand using the same "brand" as their mother institutions abroad. Examples are Stamford University and Webster University.

#### **More International Programmes Being Offered**

The higher education system is more internationalized "bringing the Thai education system to the international standard as well as making Thailand the country of higher education destination for Southeast Asia" according to Kirtikara (2001, p. 9).

In 2008, both Thai public and private higher education institutions offered 884 international programmes using English as the medium of instruction (CHE, 2008b). Between the year of 2007 and 2008, Thailand had 16,361 international students enrolling in 96 Thai higher education institutions, 60.96% of which joining the state education system and 39.04% for private one. Most of them studied for a bachelor degree level which accounts for 65.17%, graduate level 16.37%. Among these 16,361 international students, the majority were from Asia continent, followed by North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and South America. China represented the majority of 44.62%, followed by Laos and Myanmar. USA students were the majority among the Western countries. Thai language is the most popular field of study for these international students, followed by Thai culture and Thai studies, Business Administration, English language and International Business and Marketing (ONEC (Office of the National Education Council), 2006). Among these 884 international programmes, 629 are programs for public universities, while 255 are programs for private universities (CHE, 2009). If taking a look at the total number of international programs in 2004 which has only 465 programs, it is clearly seen that the international programs have almost doubled the number from the year of 2004 to 2008 to accommodate the needs of both Thai and foreign students. If classified in terms of level of study, international master's degree is the highest in number (350 programs), whereas bachelor's degree is the second (296 programs) and doctoral degree is the third (215 programs). The rest 23 are for others, e.g., certificate program. International colleges have been established in several universities to provide international education. For example, Faculty of Agriculture of Kasetsart University offers a four-year English program "International BS in Tropical Agriculture". Furthermore, many new specializations are being implemented as a result of this global demand, for example, Faculty of Arts of Chulalongkorn University offers Thai studies, Chinese as a foreign language, French for the business world; College of Public Health Sciences, Chulalongkorn University offers post-graduate programs in specialities like Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicines. The most recent joint program that Thammasat University has launched in 2009 is in the area of health science. It offers the first international program for a master of science degree and a doctoral degree in Health-related Services Management with the George Washington University, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, The World Health Organization and Pan American Health Organization (see Appendix A).

## **Venue for Education Fairs**

Many education fairs and seminars from different countries are held in Bangkok and the major cities of Thailand which include Khon Kaen in the northeast, Chiang Mai in the north and Phuket in the south. These places turn to be the central ground for recruiting students. Examples of such Education Fairs are Education UK Talks Study Canada seminar by CEC (Canadian Education Centre) Network, Canada, Education Australia Expo JEDUCATION Fair for studies in Japan, study in Switzerland Information and Application Day by Swiss Education Group, study in Singapore, New Zealand Education Fair and study in US Fair and World MBA tour (see Appendix B).

## Thailand as an Offshore Site for Regional and International Recruitment

Many individual foreign universities or higher learning institutes are using Thailand as a recruitment center for students to study at their institutes. Many advertisements for such purpose are prevalent in Thai local newspapers' education page.

The University of New South Wales, Australia, placed an advertisement for recruiting students in Thailand with the slogan "Global education, global networks and global opportunities". Many foreign universities or learning institutes, especially in the nearby region, placed advertisements in Thai newspapers to recruit their English teachers and support staff. RMIT (The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) International

University Vietnam placed the advertisement in Bangkok Post and Post Today to recruit lecturers in specific specializations to work for RMIT in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam.

#### **Spinning out of New Types of Relevant Business**

Many new businesses in education are being set up in relation to such growing demand of "international education". Companies for translation, translating abstracts from Thai to English or proofreading and editing abstracts, thesis in English are emerging. To name a few, International Language and Translation Institute offers translation in English, Thai, Chinese, French, German, Japanese and Spanish. English language tutoring schools for TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), IELTS (International English Language Testing System), SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) tests or institutes that coach other languages, e.g., Chinese, Korea, Japanese are almost everywhere, such as "PRO Language", which provides native teachers to teach English, Spanish and German, "In Lingua" which coaches English with its 16 branches all over Bangkok and "Knowledge House", which offers Language Tests Coaching as well as main subjects (e.g., maths, science, physics and chemistry) in English program. Many new agencies and companies are set up as coordinator/facilitator in processing the Thai students who want to study abroad for a certain degree (Sinhaneti, 2009).

Recently, the second Education Reform and the Second 15-year Long Range Plan on Higher Education (2008-2022) imposed a new perspective upon higher education institution to play more crucial roles in society (ONEC, 2009). Traditional missions and functions of higher education are providing and promoting academic and professional education, promoting and conducting research and studies for generating knowledge, providing public service and preserving and promoting arts, traditions and cultural heritage. Kirtikara (2001) explained this phenomenon clearly in his paper presented at the Thai-US Education Roundtable in Bangkok:

The first new expectation is placed upon higher education institutes to play roles of watchdogs, social beacons and society conscience building. This came out of realization that universities had played passive roles during the rapid socio-economic transformation of Thailand during the last 2 decades, this being distinct from the 2510s when leading social and political movements were university-driven. The second expectation is for higher education institutes on manpower development, not only producing graduates but being a pivotal and important instrument in professional upgrading and life long learning. This being so, the target groups for higher education institutes will not only be hundreds of thousands of school graduates a year as present, but millions of the workforce in the future. (p. 8)

In his keynote address on "Higher Education and the Country Development: Reflection of the Current Situation and Future Direction", Laksanavisit (2009), the former Minister of Education, has highlighted the mainframe of the Second Education Reform which is in the framework of the Second 15-year Long Range Plan on Higher Education (2008-2022) by saying that:

The second education reform aims to promote quality life-long learning among Thai people. The new reform concentrates on three themes: 1 quality, 2 educational opportunity and 3 participation in arranging education from all sectors. In terms of quality, a new generation of teachers, new sources for knowledge acquirement and new administrative systems need to be created. As for educational opportunity, all Thai people need to be provided with as many possibilities and opportunities to access education. To achieve this, participatory cooperation will be sought from all involved sectors with regards to arranging education. (p. 1)

Emerging trends of Thai Higher Education, as a consequence, are shifting towards.

## **Community-Driven and Societal Development Focus**

As the OHEC (Office of the Higher Education Commission) has attempted to reposition the Thai higher education system to act in "response with the emerging needs of the society and the economy" (Overview of Current Thai Higher Education Development, 2010) by addressing missions of higher education sector towards more societal participation and students' lifelong learning, the Second 15-year Long Range Plan on Higher Education, thus, gives focus on the production of graduates of quality, capability of life-long work and adjustment. This Long Range Plan on Higher education is based on seven scenarios of the global, regional and local socio-economic environment which are: (1) demographic change; (2) energy and the environment; (3) future employment; (4) decentralization of the country and development of local administrative bodies; (5) peaceful conflicts resolution and violence; (6) post modern/post industrial world; and (7) His Majesty the King's initiation on "Sufficiency Economy".

As a result, OHEC, for the first time, categorizes Thai higher education into four sub-systems to reflect clearly its strengths and aspirations. The four groups of higher education institutions will have differentiated mission and goal. The four categories are: (1) research and postgraduate universities; (2) specialized including science and technology and comprehensive universities; (3) four-year universities and liberal arts colleges; and (4) community colleges.

OHEC Annual Report (2009) underpinned clearly the purpose of such categorization as:

Each sub-system would serve national priorities and strategies as well as addressing global, national, regional demands with the goals to enhance the country competitiveness, and to serve as prime movers for the development of real sector workforces, manufacturing and service sectors. (p. 1)

Furthermore, "enterprising spirit" will be a new trait to be cultivated as a higher education culture (ONEC, 2007). Innovation in thinking and enterprising from both staff and lecturers for the benefits of the university and the public is encouraged. Universities will be seen as "a potential source and incubator for young and technologically oriented entrepreneurs" Kirtikara (2001, p. 10). To help foster this, "University Business Incubator" project, the aim of which is to foster linkages between university and industry as well as to equip students with entrepreneurial skill, has been implemented in 2004. Fifty-three public universities and three private universities have participated so far. In addition, the project to link universities and the rural community has started since 2003. The aim is to strengthen capacity of the grass root economy through networks. Each network runs research topics relevant to strategies, problems and needs of the rural communities by collaborating with local communities and or stakeholders, such as, local administration, leaders of local wisdom and farmers. As such, the Commission of Higher Education itself and many universities have devised many projects in accordance with this societal development and community involvement focus. University students are encouraged to familiarize and learn from 140 communities all over the country during the semester brake in summer (Ministry of Education, 2008). Students from 21 universities in 14 provinces have participated in the Project SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise), "An international non-profit organization that works with leaders in business and higher education to mobilize university students in making a difference in their communities while developing the skills to become socially responsible business leaders" (SIFE, 2010).

Participating students will form teams on their university campuses and apply business concepts to develop outreach projects that improve the quality of life and standard of living for communities. Each team will adapt their approach to the diverse needs of people in different communities. The result is "a program that

is global in scope and purpose with the flexibility and responsiveness of a community-based organization" (SIFE, 2010). In other words, SIFE is a part of the development of community leaders and entrepreneurs who ultimately provide a highly trained, experienced and motivated talent pool for business to recruit from. A group of 20 Shinawatra University students in April 2010 participated in mangrove reforestation hoping to help save the world and its environment, while Chulalongkorn University students and alumni participated in the "Chula Love the World Project" to expand the green area by planting more trees. Likewise, three student leaders from Shinawatra University recently joined other 200 university students in a seminar on student leaders for "Social Changes Development" whose purpose was to bring their attention into the present problems on social, economical, political and environmental issues. Another project for resource conservation and increased use of alternative energy for Chulalongkorn is to use leaves from their trees to make fertilizers and to use leftover food from the canteen to produce gas for cooking food. In addition, "bicycles" campaign on campus is being launched to help prevent the global warming. Another attempt to involve with the communities initiated by Chulalongkorn University is to encourage each faculty to choose one community to give sustainable help with financial support from the university. The university will also implement projects to create good relations with nearby communities surrounding the campus (Chulalongkorn University, 2010).

#### **Centre of Excellence**

To strengthen R & D (research and development) activities, a concept of "Centre of Excellence" for postgraduate education and research in cooperation with the industry and private sectors has been initiated. Nine priority science and technology areas for research and development are:

- (1) Innovation in chemistry;
- (2) Toxicology, environmental health and management of toxic chemicals;
- (3) Environmental and hazardous waste management;
- (4) Petroleum petrochemicals and advanced materials;
- (5) Energy technology and environment;
- (6) Agricultural biotechnology;
- (7) Post harvest technology innovation;
- (8) Mathematics;
- (9) Physics.

Likewise, to support the Thai framework for R & D Centre of Excellence, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) authorities will cooperate on developing research clusters for South-East Asia, which means that joint research areas on mutual interests among participating universities will be identified and carried out. The expected outcome will be a three-year roadmap among universities in ASEAN for promoting such research (OHEC, 2009):

The roadmap will focus on building up key platforms for regional research assessment, research publications and academic research clusters. The established platforms will concentrate on enhancing potential and strong areas that ASEAN has, especially, in the areas of agriculture, renewable energy, as well as areas that have significant social impacts on re-emerging tropical deceases, and biotechnology. (p. 2)

Chulalongkorn University, for example, has established research unit and Centre of Excellence, and seven Chula Research Clusters to entertain public policy in human security, food and water, energy, climate change, emerging health risks, aging society and advanced materials. Besides, Chulalongkorn has initiated "Chula-Saraburi" project in order to extend research for private and industrial sectors by building 15 model factories, 60 model products, 15 technology models and 45 models for technology transfer to private enterprises. Management of agricultural resources and 97 syllabuses have been designed to help enhance the potentiality of those who are jobless in the latter case (Chulalongkorn University, 2010).

#### **Regional Hub**

As Thailand aspires to become "a world-class regional academic and education hub in Southeast Asia" or regional education hub with the aim of increasing foreign students up to 100,000 from the current figure of 20,000, high priority dovetails into upgrading quality of Thai universities to achieve international standard while upholding social responsibility. Regional education cooperation especially through ASEAN and the SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) network has been strengthened. Harmonization of higher education in ASEAN could come up with common and integrated education package that addresses quality assurance, degree recognition and qualifications, learning outcomes, credit transfer system and mobility programme for both students and faculties by applying lessons learned from Europe Bologna model. The project DIRECT (Diversity and Regional Integration in the Higher Education Sector-Bologna Process, Qualifications Framework and Credit Transfer) has, thus, been endorsed (OBEC (Office of the Basic Education), 2008). As such, the pilot project with the participation of Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand to exchange undergraduate students for one semester with the goal of credit transferability will take place with the ultimate goal of mutual recognition of degrees and qualifications. The first batch of exchange period was in June 2010. The second Retreat meeting with Indonesia resulted in the agreement for Indonesia and Thailand to develop student leaders under the project "Student Exposure for Global awareness". APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), ASEM (Asia-Europe Meeting), UMAP (University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific), GMS (The Greater Mekong Sub-region) and ASEAN (Association for Southeast Asian Nations) University Network strengthened their collaborations in the region and came up with many projects involving Thailand. NUFFIC (The Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education), DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), France, Austria and China initiated many projects along the same line especially France's 24 research projects on energy and environment. Chulalongkorn University, for example, is constructing a multi-functional international complex and an international dormitory to accommodate this Thai-Asian world educational gateway initiative.

# A Case Study of Shinawatra University

In line with the Ministry mission to cope with the global challenges together with the far vision of the founders of Shinawatra University: former Prime Minister Taksin Shinawatra and Professor Dr Purachai Piumsombun (2001, p. 4). As a new university at the time, Shinawatra University has been built on the conceptual framework of research university, research park, research and development, human value, virtual campus, virtual museum, electronic campus, electronic library, interactive electronic classroom, learning innovation, learning to learn, edutainment, IT (Internet technology) network, energy saving and potentiality of the nation. Professor in architecture, Soontorn Boonyatikarn, has been brought in to design the Shinawatra University buildings and campus bearing in mind the concept of natural surrounding for the purpose of energy saving, the design that matches the humid climate of the area with minimum maintenance cost but ensures safety during operation, the multi-purpose use of the building for research, teaching, academic forum, seminar

as well as social gathering. The energy saving concept is a major design of all campus buildings, whether in terms of wind velocity, air-temperature and ventilation, relative humidity and lighting level in the buildings. Every building is designed to control the "Olgyay's comfort zone" which consists of thermal comfort, lighting comfort, acoustic comfort, visual comfort and indoor air quality: IAQ (Indoor Air Quality), safety and security and information technology (Boonyatikarn, 2002). In other words, the design is based on V. Olgyay's concept in architectural design with climate and bioclimatic approach. Within the university, learning can take place in different forms: learning in natural zone, learning in passive zone, learning in semi-passive zone and learning in control zone. Environmental modification techniques are used in the design of the university. The design is to maximize the use of natural daylight in the inside building. In addition, building acoustics in both the lecture rooms and the auditorium are state of the art so as to minimize the use of loudspeakers and microphones (see Appendix C). Bangkok Post's article on "Raising the Curtain" in the Learning Post column (2002) summarized this unique feature of the Shinawatra University design as follows:

Built environment is a new field combining architecture, technology and environment awareness to construct eco-friendly facilities suited to the human activities taking place there.

The design of the site itself is based on the principle of "micro-climate modification" aimed at reducing temperatures to a comfortable level. This includes the use of natural vegetation and bodies of water, minimizing the amount of hard-top surfaces, and reducing the footprint of buildings by using a circular design.

The buildings at Shinawatra University are designed specifically for central Thailand's torrid climate. The buildings' outer coverings or "envelopes" consist of specially designed materials which dramatically reduce electricity consumption saving an estimated 50 million baht per year over conventional design.

Above all, the design is intended to promote the university's philosophy of collaborative learning and to foster a sense of community.

As a consequence, the university received two awards for energy saving. The first one was 2003 Regional Technology Award from ASHRAE (the American Society of Heating Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers) Inc., and the Asean Energy awards from ACE (the Asia Centre for Energy) in 2003 as the winner for "Energy Efficient Buildings" under the "New and Existing Building Category". The plaque citation read as follows:

Asean Energy Awards 2003 to Central Academic Shinawatra University Building of Thailand. Winner Energy Efficient Buildings, New and Existing Building Category. Given this 3rd day of July 2003 on the occasion of the SOME/21st AMEM (Asian Ministers on Energy Meeting) in Langawi, Malaysia.

Also Shinawatra University with its attempt to eradicate inequality in educational opportunities has recently offered 50 scholarships in full amount for high school students, the majority of whom are from the low income families, to study an international programme in Shinawatra University. They are mainly from the Northeast, the North, central and South of Thailand respectively.

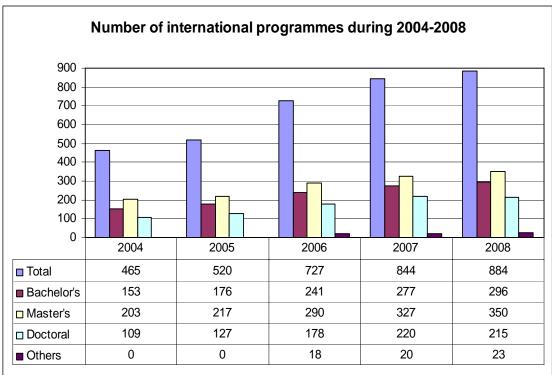
Though the Thai higher education institutions have geared up for a foreword momentum in charting this new distinctive course imposed by the Ministry of Education's recent education reform, the universities must not forget their prime and core business of teaching as Shattock (2003) once stated:

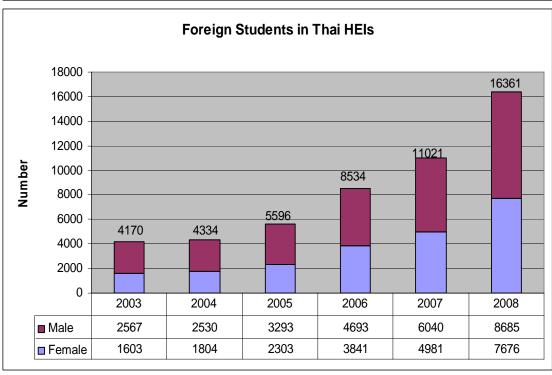
The most successful universities will continue to preserve teaching and research as the primary elements of their core business because the evidence suggests that the more effective they are in them the more they can contribute to this broadening agenda. (p. 120)

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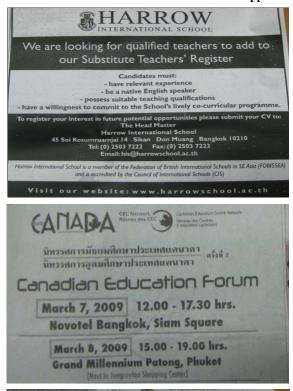
Appendix A





Taken from Commission on Higher Education (2008), Cooperation among Higher Institutes of Thailand and Overseas Partners.

## Appendix B





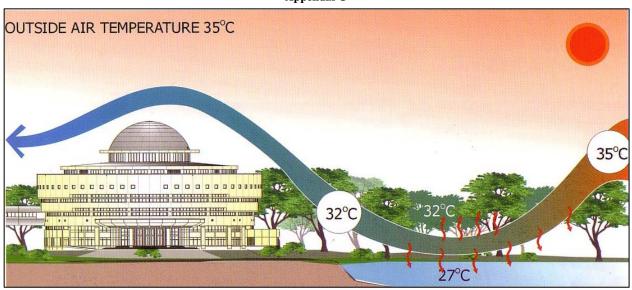


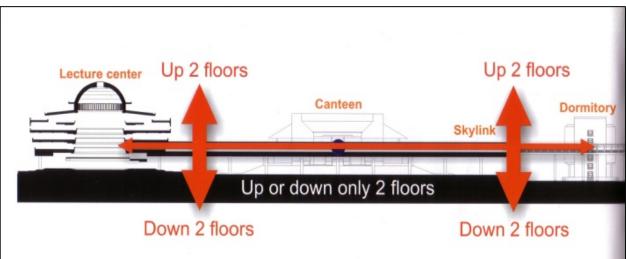




Samples of International Schools ADS and Education fairs in Thailand ADS.

## Appendix C





Taken from Boonyatikarn, Soontorn (2002) Integrated Design Approve Shinawatra University. Bangkok: GM Mag Media Co.