

CHALLENGES FOR THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN THE AEC (ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY): AN INTRINSIC QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY AT RMUTL IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were to develop healthier practices in higher education institutions in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, to develop protocols and procedures, and particularly to promote the international image and reputation of Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Hence, the researchers proposed particular notions that should maximize the university's opportunities to play a part in international education for the AEC, and various trends were investigated that might lead to internationalize RMUTL. The findings were presented in seven broad issues, as follows: strategies; demanding policies; RMUTL strengths; Office of the International Relations; curricula; technological factors; and accelerate the internationalization of RMUTL in the AEC. Finally, the researchers drew some recommendations for decision makers, and scholars in ASEAN universities.

Keywords: RMUTL, AEC, ASEAN, Internationalization, Higher Education Institution

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INTRODUCTION

Rajamangala University of Technology (RMUT) consists of 9 universities in Thailand, and Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL) itself has six campuses located in the northern part of Thailand: Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang, Tak, Phitsanuloke, and Nan. RMUTL is a large public university, which has a rich history and one of the famous universities in Thailand in science and technology (President's office in RMUTL, 2015). According to RMUTL'S vision, the objective is to strive to internationalize its educational mission and advance teaching and research efforts to meet global standards of excellence. It also concentrates on the preservation of national cultural values and the environment (President's office of RMUTL, 2012). RMUTL actively pursue international contacts with overseas universities and institutes for cooperative activities, including student and faculty exchange, joint training programs, organizing academic conferences and seminars, as well as other types of academic cooperation.

This study explored a stream of ideas linked to the internationalization venture that might develop RMUTL to become one of the most competitive universities in the ASEAN economic community (AEC). The researchers of this study believe that discussions of the internationalization of higher education can promote issues that blend knowledge from external sources with the local wisdom in order to nurture people's favorable qualities as Thai and other citizens. However, the researchers are consciously aware that the study of a particular community is considered to be extremely complicated, due to the intricacy of social relations and the clear quandaries

of attempting to generalize about citizens, their groupings, and the context within which they take actions (Sklair, 2002). Most importantly, this study will determine the indispensable practices that will lead to the internationalization of RMUTL as a whole with regard to the present conditions or status of RMUTL.

Purposes of the Study

The reasons for which this study was shaped were: (a) to explore a wide range of policies, strategies, and perspectives needed for internationalizing RMUTL, and (b) to investigate the factors that can facilitate and enhance the internationalization of RMUTL in the AEC.

Methods

A constructivist paradigm was applied for this study, as the researchers were hoping to construct the knowledge to the reader. An intrinsic qualitative case study was applied in this investigation. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 20 respondents, 17 of whom are executives in RMUTL. One respondent is the former director of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and two respondents are experts in the Thai Higher Education Commission. For the analysis task, many efforts were made to define codes and categories from the rich information garnered in the interviews, and several methods were also significant to triangulate the results (e.g. field notes, documentation, and audit trail). Lastly, privacy, confidentiality, and trustworthiness were considered paramount in the study.

The Concept of ‘Internationalization’ in Higher Education Institutions

Contributions from several scholars revealed that internationalization could be defined in many different ways. 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 will be 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 the global environment and ways of interaction in it. Moreover, Srisa-an (1998) said that internationalization means the integration of international dimensions and principles in all the missions of the university; namely, internationalization of both undergraduate and graduate curricular offerings, promotion of faculty and students exchanges, collaborative research with foreign universities, promotion of other activities like cooperative education, university-industry linkages and cultural exchange, as well as hiring of foreign faculty members and bilingualism.

In conclusion, it is recommended to have a committee from different departments to define the term internationalization of a higher education institution comprehensively with regard to the organization’s culture, mission, and vision. This was supported by Deem, Mok, and Lucas (2008, p.21), as follows:

not only European but also Asian states

should be aware of the differences between policy learning and policy copying. If we copy policy practices without proper adaptation and careful contextualization, we might easily encounter problems, including in Asia, a process of re-colonization, resulting in reproducing learning experiences that do not fit the specific cultural and political environments in the East.

Briefly, after reviewing the research studies that are related to the internationalization of higher education institutes in the developed and the developing nations, the researchers discovered that the internationalization of higher education has become a vital tactic both to awaken professionals working in higher education institutions themselves to new challenges, as well as to generate skilled graduates for individual countries around the world.

The Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions in Thailand

The higher education system in Thailand is becoming more internationalized and making Thailand the destination of higher education for Southeast Asia (Kirtikara, 2001). Nonetheless, Kirtikara acknowledged that during the internationalization era of the Thai higher education institutions, retention, refinement, and improvement of indigenous capability and knowledge must be taken into account, so that Thais will sustain the most favorable balance of local and global knowledge. According to Chang (2011), higher education institutions in Thailand that wish to provide international programs should guarantee that their programs have the following characteristics to reveal the proper

feature of international education: (a) quality and management efficiency of the programs; (b) international standards and criteria for curricula issues; (c) qualifications and diversity of instructors; (d) a diverse student body; (e) an international academic learning environment; and (f) international standard facilities and services.

Accordingly, the following are endeavors developed to internationalize three prominent and leading public universities in Thailand. First, the International Affairs Department at Chulalongkorn University (CU) was built to undertake numerous challenges associated with academic services, activities, and exchanges, as well as to develop international liaisons with institutions overseas (Office of International Affairs CU, 2012). Another indicator is at Mahidol University (MU), which is a strategic partner with over 130 academic and international agencies and institutions abroad in a variety of areas, such as academic exchange, curriculum development, and research (International College, Mahidol University, 2012). In addition, several projects and programs are developed to promote the internationalization of their education. At King Mongkut University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), key responsibilities for the International Affairs Department involve: exchange programs, information and protocol, and linkages and funds (Office of International Affairs, KMUTT, 2012). The followings are most appropriate for such a collective approach:

- Advise all units of the university about their internationalization activities.
- Recruit international students.
- Manage international admissions in collaboration with academic and admissions staff.

- Manage international student services.
- Raise funds and administer the international linkages budget.
- Manage partnerships in which numerous academic units have an interest.
- Support the writing and implementation of official agreements.
- Assist in the development of international research grant applications.
- Provide necessary reporting protocols for international activities.
- Monitor progress relative to the benchmarks that took place.
- Submit an annual report to the Senate on progress relative to benchmarks (Policy on Internationalization, 2006).

Results and Discussions of Related Literature

In this section, the researchers will attempt to display the most significant findings of the study in accordance with previous studies. Hence, the researchers will discuss seven broad issues and their components according to what has been obtained from the interviews and reviewed in recent studies.

Strategies

The participants of this study described some aspects that can make an influential strategic plan to make the internationalization processes of RMUTL successful. Morris (2009) indicated prime constituents for guiding strategic planning for internationalization as follows: clearness and precision are fundamental criteria in execut-

ing a genuine plan; carry out major planning tasks (e.g., mission, vision, goals, duties, audits, and awareness, SWOT analysis); and flexibility in modifying and adjusting the plan whenever required. Similarly, the participants of the study urged an effective analysis of RMUTL's environment and vision, clearly define present strategies and develop action plans to identify elements that negatively affect our progress. Ley (2012) noted different aspects linked to human development in ASEAN, as follows: (a) education: prioritizing, awareness of ASEAN among all individuals, university network, ASEAN language (e.g., English language); (b) Human Resources Development (HRD): skilled, competent, and well equipped for the ASEAN workforce, center of excellence to recognize the needs of high value added industries that enhance ASEAN global competitiveness, ASEAN standard competitiveness, and ASEAN skill competitiveness; (c) decent work: ASEAN competencies recognition framework, and ASEAN network of experts; and (d) civil service capability: high quality of public services, public HR competencies, and the ASEAN resource center. Likewise, the participants viewed the following matters necessary to step forward: develop our teaching methods and techniques, being active and proactive to skills needed for labor markets; develop differentiation strategies; develop strategies to exchange students and staff; develop our curricula; build our brand; adequate budget for international recruitment; promote gradual development philosophies; enhance collaboration in RMUTL; and develop networks with experts and consultants in ASEAN. Many participants emphasized the following:

we have to have some committees who are able to study, and transfer informa-

tion to all people in RMUTL about the infrastructure of the ASEAN countries to learn how to cooperate with them effectively. Each country has its own system. Some aspects are related to people's beliefs, and some are related to their cultures, and traditions. So, we have to be aware of these issues before doing MOUs with other universities.

Demanding Policies

The researchers explored the topic of the important policies needed to internationalize RMUTL when interviewing the participants of this study, in order to determine the greatest number of possibilities in understanding the issue of the internationalization of RMUTL in the AEC. The participants pointed out some necessary policies that need to be taken into account in RMUTL's management policies, such as effective recruitment and selection policies; effective HRD and HRM policies; policy for staff, and executive core competencies and qualifications; policy development and implementation process; a policy for an autonomous system; a pilot project policy; developing mindsets policy; regulatory framework policy; a policy that makes RMUTL become an international university; monitoring rules policies; and return on investment (ROI) policies. To help institutions delineate influential internationalization approaches, national policies and country specific-goals for internationalization should be well-associated with an informative policy framework (Henard, Diamond, & Roseveare, 2012). Knight (1999) reported that organizational strategies: engage policies, procedures, systems, and supporting infrastructures, which smooth the progress of and maintain the interna-

tional attribute of the educational institution. The participants of the current study confirmed:

we should have a policy that emphasizes HRD in RMUTL, to identify the right number of instructors needed, as well as the qualifications, and competencies required. Additionally, the university has to have an effective HR system to support the lecturers' quality of life, to have an effective compensation system, and to minimize ethical problems that negatively affect the teaching and the learning environment.

Altogether, internationalism offers many challenges for the personnel policy of an institution, and many new or larger tasks are developed, including:

- international marketing for students and projects and general grants;
- management of international programs (e.g., admissions, assessment, student mobility, housing and social facilities for a multicultural student body, and student services); and
- teaching in different languages and/or in different cultural settings (Davies, 1992).

Some participants added the need for developing rigorous policies to recruit qualified academics and administrative employees. With regard to their language skills, we should have a strong policy about student selection in each program. Students must have a reasonable level of English skill. In addition, our instructors must have a high level of English skills to be able to teach Thai and foreign students in English.

RMUTL Strengths

The strengths of RMUTL were thoroughly addressed by the participants of this study as followed: strategic location; six campuses in different provinces; Lanna culture; Lanna works of art, and architecture; capability to develop bilingual programs in diverse majors; and produce competent graduates in a variety of disciplines. Other participants acknowledged that Lanna culture, and Lanna works of art and architecture are considered our strengths in RMUTL. His Majesty the King Bhumibol had a lucid rationale to stipulate the young generation to construct Thai identity in terms of art and culture, alongside with the modern world (Chalapati, 2007). As Chalapati affirmed, the verification of that can be viewed today in Thai style university buildings, the styles of academic gowns, and some courses in Thai arts, literature, language, history, and Buddhism, delivered by Thai universities, besides the courses adopted from Western countries. Accordingly, Featherstone (1990) stated: when we talk of traits which are neither universal nor idiosyncratic, we often use the term "culture" to describe the collection of such traits, or of such behaviors, or of such values, or of such beliefs. In short, in this usage, each "group" has its specific culture. (p.31)

The researchers of this study believe that the efforts made to internationalize RMUTL and other higher education institutions in Thailand do not mean to westernize the education system. In contrast, efforts should be guided towards preserving Thai culture that foreigners in Thailand and overseas have both cherished and valued. Thus, the participants of this study lovingly expressed their opinions and feel-

ings as follows:

Lanna works of art and architecture is another factor that strengthens RMUTL because it attracts many foreigners to us.

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.

Our Lanna identity makes outsiders curious to know about us. For example, we have Lanna architectures in RMUTL, and when people talk about Lanna arts, and culture, it is a must to think of RMUTL only.

Sloper and Can (1995) perceived that at Thang Long University in Vietnam they are facing considerable challenges in resolving any boundaries, through a strong commitment to sincerity, while maintaining the Vietnamese culture and identity. Other strengths involve RMUTL’s reputation in producing graduates with practical skills and responding to labor market needs, which attract employers to RMUTL’s students and recruit them for their organizations. As the participants of this study stated, other strengths were: academic mobility programs; worldwide networks and connections; vocational and hands-on university; ability to publish research in international venues; and a leading university in painting, sculpture, and arts. Speaking of academic mobility, Carroll-Boegh and Takagi (2006) recommended the endorsement of student and staff mobility to boost their global competitiveness. Based on the ASEAN Concord II (2003), ASEAN shall continue current efforts to promote regional mobility and reciprocal recognition of professional credentials, talents, and

skills progress. The education ministers of ASEAN have determined four significant matters for cooperative education in the region, one of which is the enhancement of the ASEAN universities network (Quy, 2009). Networking is giving rise to unprecedented opportunities and facilitating the internationalization processes (Dana, 2001). The benefits associated with such cooperative networking, as Dana informed, would affect the dynamics of competition, forcing others to imitate it. Moreover, Quy noted that the ASEAN universities network objective is: the enhancement of the cooperation among academics and researchers in Southeast Asia, the development of HR in the region, the maximization of information transfer among research groups, and the enhancement of awareness of regional identity between the ASEAN states.

Office of the International Relations

In this part of the study, the researchers found rich and comprehensive portrayals of the significant role of the international relations office in RMUTL, particularly in the ASEAN era. For the current study, the participants articulated the following: actively invite institutions in RMUTL; enhance cooperation, and 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:

the international relations office should develop action plans, coordinate different projects, cooperate with foreign universities, search for scholarships, provide training courses, and develop research and exchange programs for

staff, students, and faculty members.

Other critical roles found for the staff at this office involve: counselors; ambassadors; professionals, dedicated and proactive staff; active coordination across various faculties and departments; student staff and academic mobility; a platform for cultural exchange; and developing a scholarship program and international standards. Other participants of the current study added curriculum design support for faculty members; executive visit projects; marketing tactics; and a hub for international news and an information center.

Accordingly, as stated in the mission statement of the Office of International Affairs of Chulalongkorn University (CU), the emphasis is on cooperative activities, academic exchanges with international institutions, and academic services to international communities. Another indicator is in the mission statement of the Office of International Affairs of King Mongkut University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), the office was set up to implement international relations by emphasizing the cooperation between KMUTT and other institutions, both in the country and overseas, through academic cooperation, staff and students exchanges, scholarships, and grants for studying and training. Additionally, and above all, delegation of authority and responsibility, and becoming the central unit of RMUTL were also valuable recommendations explicitly mentioned by the participants of this study:

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 foreign affairs office is just a tool, but if you do not use the tool, some things may not hap-

pen as we planned for it.

Curricula

Garza (2008) noted that if the faculty has some deficiencies in providing international views in its sciences, the development of an international curriculum was perhaps a great challenge or a barrier. The participants notified similar views of the significance of curriculum features. For instance, 2+2 or 3+1 programs and support from the Office of Civil Service Commission (OCSC); international accreditation; student and academic mobility; offer diversity activities; accentuate cross-cultural games and activities for both Thai and foreign students; ascertain a tool that guarantees quality teaching; engage students in research; create an environment that promotes pluralistic learning; and cultural preservation. Importantly, one participant in this study expressed the following:

we are trying to establish international curricula by cooperating with foreign universities, such as 2+2 or 3+1 programs. However, sometimes we face some problems, and we need more support from the Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC) for credit evaluation, and approval.

Another participant of this study formulated the following on the issue of foreign language competencies:

I believe that foreign languages competencies are very important. However, the most important things are the way we think, our teaching methods, and techniques.

Even if we cannot speak good English, we can use non-verbal language to communicate with each other.

Other participants of the current study added to the perspective: working through a foreign intermediary or a joint venture; ensure compliance with the Commission of Higher Education (CHE) requirements and the Thai Qualifications Framework (TQF); develop programs that stimulate active learning and teaching; and inspirational teaching methods, and techniques.

Additionally, RMUTL has many cooperative agreements with many universities and institutions overseas, including Germany, New Zealand, Japan, and its activities involve hands-on curriculum development (President's office in RMUTL, 2008). To be ranked one of the top universities, Mahidol University committed to collaborate with different organizations for curriculum development (International College, Mahidol University, 2012). In a similar vein, the historic mission of Yale University in the U.S. can be accomplished if it develops relevant curricula, creates opportunities for students to work or study overseas, and educates and provides American students with opportunities to develop networks with a variety of national cultures (Jiang-Bin, 2009). The second indicator was at Tokyo Institute of Technology in Japan. Jiang-Bin reported that the efforts made there were (a) to develop the faculty and students' communication competencies in English, (b) to steadily establish bilingual curricula, (c) to educate international aptitudes, (d) to invite experts from different countries to contribute in academic management, and (e) to enhance cooperative agreements through international exchanges and ventures. In short, as Bartell (2003) recognized, the prerequisites for changes at universities involve:

- a curriculum assessment to ensure the prominence of the international dimensions of issues;
 - a significant percentage of students recruited from abroad including both developed and developing nations;
 - more progress in the quantity and the quality of exchange programs, study abroad programs, and internships to allow students to meet and experience other cultures; and
 - enhance the use of diversity and international experience from faculty members, students, and eventually, the entire community.
- A large number of studies, concerning the internationalization of higher education strongly promoted the implementation of internationalization in higher education, through the development of relevant curricula that match the world's needs or the world market, embrace different pedagogical cultures, and incorporate study abroad programs as an important component of curricula. It also becomes essential to consider the following if we desire to offer an international education: (a) support efforts within schools and departments to develop curriculum with global perspectives; (b) provide opportunities for faculty involvement in planning and development of international programs; (c) strengthen cross-disciplinary collaboration on campus and with the international community; (d) promote outstanding examples of international collaboration in teaching and research; (e) expand programs that link international students to communities; (f) partner with the community in providing international education opportunities; (g) collaborate in submitting grant proposals in support of international education on campus; establish an international initiative council; and (h) engage in mutual consultation in international program development (White Pa-

per, 2010). Another study raised significant questions for implementing an international curriculum at the faculty level. These were: (a) Is pedagogy equally as significant, or more significant, than content for those who wish to internationalize curriculum? (b) How relevant is an academic's conception of teaching and learning to their acceptance or rejection of an international curriculum? (c) What is the role of international students in the international curriculum? (d) Are their disciplinary differences in perceptions of and strategies for an international curriculum? (Bell, 2004). However, *"questions of internationality and multiculturality, along with all other questions of curriculum content, are viewed by the dominant empiricist paradigm as belonging in the realm of politics, not of academic inquiry. Academic educationists mostly concentrate on issues of effectivity and of learning theory"*. (Pinar, 2013, p.349).

Technological Factors

Undoubtedly, the use of information communication technology (ICT) in higher education institutions is making significant changes in teaching approaches and the learning of students. According to Mikre (2011), there is a common belief that the use of ICT in education contributes to a more constructivist learning and greater responsibility of students. In other words, ICT has a great impact on pedagogical approaches in classrooms, school innovation, and community services. Therefore, ICT should be fundamental at all levels of an educational setting. Additionally, Mikre noted some ICTs benefits, as follows:

- provide the opportunity for more student-centered teaching;
- offer greater opportunity for

teacher-to-teacher and student-to-student communication;

- offer greater exposure to workforce competencies for students;
- offer opportunities for different technologies delivered by instructors;
- enhance enthusiasm for learning;
- provide instructors new sources of information;
- offer additional resources for students; and
- improve the efficiency of educational administration and management.

Similarly, Oliver (2002) concluded that the development of ICTs within education will have a strong impact on what is learned; how it is learned; when and where learning takes place; and who is learning, and who is teaching. However, students must be able to use information resources in a systematic way, be able to recognize examples of information processing technologies, and be able to consult information resources (Tondeur, Van Braak, & Valcke, 2007). As a caveat, many ministries of education perceive computers as a stand-alone subject requiring a curriculum that emphasizes basic computer literacy skills. Therefore, Hawkins (2002) advised the integration of computers and the Internet into the broader curriculum is where real learning benefits will be made. Nevertheless, instructors should be trained in ICT and curricula revised to speed up the integration.

Further, Vajargah, Jahani, and Azadmanesh (2010) reported the following applications of ICT in curriculum activities: (a) using digital libraries and internet-based information for improve-

ment of curriculum contents; (b) sharing experiences among faculty members inside and outside the university; enhancing students' interests and needs in curriculum decision-making through web based needs evaluation; (c) offering web-based presentation of curriculum; (d) using e-mail in teaching and learning processes; (e) applying software programs for effective teaching and learning; (f) developing a dynamic feedback mechanism online; and (g) producing digital learning materials (e.g., e-books). Thus, teaching and learning materials can be enhanced by a mixture of innovative teaching methods, software, and information available through the Internet and digital libraries. Interestingly, Welle-Strand and Thune (2002) offered different arguments regarding ICTs significance for internationalizing higher education institutions. One argument was: ICTS are significant and heavily focus on the ability to deliver information and communicating without the obstacles of space and time. On the contrary, internationalization is seen as a state of mind that can only be accomplished through knowledge and experience and that personal knowledge often embedded and cannot be delivered through electronic information systems. However, the authors of this study believe that policy makers, faculty members, and all parties involved should constantly evaluate and recognize the roles of ICT in their institutions in order to work for the effective functioning of the technology in their systems. According to the Asian Development Bank (2007), ICTs strengthen public institutions, improve governance and the quality of public services, strengthen regulations, and increase awareness of citizens about significant social sector matters.

Furthermore, information technology (IT) use in all educational, learning, and

work processes; transforming HR practices through technology (eHR & HRIS); effective IT communication channels; and develop new IT systems with adequate functionality were also considered in the opinions and experiences of the participants of this study:

it is important to develop our information systems (ISs) to support our instructors, students, strategic planners, and the 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.

I think 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) reflected that the rapid growth of information technologies is directly influencing higher education systems. At Warsaw School of Economics in Poland, Geldner and Wachter (1999) perceptibly informed the strengths and weaknesses of the internationalization of the school. One of the main weaknesses found is the dearth of some fields, such as information technology and computerization, though there was evidence of continuous and large improvement. According to Suttipun (2012), all Thai universities are designed to produce graduate students with analysis, communication, and technology skills. The participants of this study noted, "*we have to use information technology (IT) and manage the use of technology to enhance our teaching skills*". Altbach and Knight (2007) reported that IT enhances commu-

nication; enables efficient storage; selection, knowledge diffusion, and knowledge transfer; and permits universities to provide academic courses through e-learning. One participant explicitly mentioned:

we have an institution of IT in our university, but the IT system is hard to implement.

We have good hard ware system, but we use it very little in our management decisions, activities, etc. For example, RMUTL website should be an effective communication channel to collect and process information in various locations in the system. We have to clearly present information to outsiders about our academic issues, such as research, programs, and curricula in RMUTL.

Pama (2012) clarified that there are several policies and projects required to react positively to globalization. In information communication technology (ICT), Pama explained that the role of the Internet is in communicating knowledge, social networking, and the potential for collaboration over time and space, increasing division between those with access and those without, and distance being transformed by ICT. Other participants found that it is also imperative to use friendly technology and invest more in IT in RMUTL. Nonetheless, Vongchavalitkul (2012) acknowledged the following challenges for Thai leadership in higher education: removing barriers; restructuring and personalizing student support; emphasizing connected and lifelong learning; and investing in technologically competent faculty.

Accelerate the Internationalization of RMUTL in the AEC

To accelerate the process of internationalizing RMUTL, the participants of this study perceived that it is fundamental to recruit and attract high-quality academics, both native and non-native English speakers. According to Carroll-Boegh and Takagi (2006), the expertise and qualifications of instructors and their teaching methods must fulfill students' needs from different cultural backgrounds; the use of English language or other foreign languages in teaching courses to develop international programs for international students; and endorse student and staff mobility to boost their global presence and competitiveness are crucial to speed and enhance the internationalization processes of a higher education institution:

we should always emphasize the use of foreign languages. We have to have an effective language centre in RMUTL to support all languages' activities. However, we do not have a specialist to be responsible for these activities. If we want to speed up the internationalization process of RMUTL, then, we need to recruit a language specialist to be responsible for all languages' activities instead of pressuring our lecturers on this work, and consider it workload for them.

Another critical issue is the effective coordination among all individuals in RMUTL, and this in parallel with Tomlinson (1999, p.24), "*complex connectivity is not just the tighter integration of social institutions, but involves the integration of individual and collective actions into the way that institutions actually work*". University administrators cannot

implement a comprehensive internationalization process without coordination with, support of, and participation by all individuals in all departments and faculty members (Dewey & Duff, 2009). Other matters, such as marketing plans, PR, networks, and study abroad projects, were also recommended by the participants of this study. Evidently, Sriwiboon (2013) discovered that there are some improvements needed in people's knowledge of being ASEAN to match future job requirements, the need to develop staff and academic competencies in universities, and knowledge transferring and cooperation with institutions from ASEAN member countries.

Furthermore, the participants of the current study articulated that enhancing student employment opportunities; developing our IT competencies; intrinsic motivation and interpersonal skills; RMUTL accountability for educating personnel about the internationalization processes; producing skilled and competent graduates; the amalgamation of the ASEAN aspects of life into our courses; and developing diverse activities and the university's environment are not considered options, or alternatives for internationalizing RMUTL. Ultimately, previous studies in different universities in Thailand, such as Chulalongkorn, and Mahidol universities, as well as the participants of this study, confirmed the need for organizing diverse cultural and social activities, for international students, and for exchange student projects.

In summary, this study suggested seven categories, which will be significant in the endeavor to internationalize RMUTL. These categories emerged from the in-depth semi-structured interviews, as follows: (a) strategies (e.g., an effective analysis of RMUTL's environment and vision,

clearly define current strategies and develop action plans, develop teaching methods and techniques, being active and proactive to skills required for labor markets, develop some differentiation strategies, develop strategies to exchange students and staff, curriculum development, build our brand, sufficient budget for international recruitment, promote gradual development philosophies, enhance collaboration, and develop networks); (b) demanding policies (e.g., effective recruitment and selection policies, effective HRD and HRM policies, a policy for staff and executive core competencies and qualifications, policy development and implementation process, a policy for an autonomous system, a pilot project policy, developing mindsets policy, regulatory framework policy, a policy that makes RMUTL an international university, monitoring rules policies, and ROI policies); (c) RMUTL strengths (e.g., strategic location, Lanna culture, Lanna works of art and architecture, capability to develop bilingual programs and produce competent graduates in diverse majors, RMUTL's reputation for responding to labor market needs, academic mobility programs, worldwide networks, vocational and hands-on university, research publications in international venues, a leading university in painting, sculpture, and arts); (d) office of the international relations (e.g., actively invite institutions in RMUTL, enhance cooperation and 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, strengthen international environmental treaties, active coordination across various departments, and a platform for cultural exchange); (e) curricula (e.g., 2+2

or 3+1 programs and support from the Office of Civil Service Commission (OCSC), international accreditation, student and academic mobility, offer diversity activities, promote cross-cultural games and activities, ascertain a tool that guarantees quality teaching, engage students in research, promote pluralistic learning, cultural preservation, working through foreign intermediaries, ensure compliance with the Commission of Higher Education (CHE) requirements and the Thai Qualifications Framework (TQF), develop programs that stimulate active learning and teaching, and inspirational teaching methods and techniques); (f) technological factors (e.g., eHR and HRIS, effective IT communication channels, new IT systems with adequate functionality); and (g) accelerate the internationalization of RMUTL in the AEC (e.g., recruit and attract high-quality academics, both native and non-native English speakers, effective marketing plans, PR, networks, study abroad projects, enhance student employment opportunities, develop IT competencies, intrinsic motivation and interpersonal skills, RMUTL accountability for educating personnel about the internationalization processes, and amalgamate the ASEAN aspects of life into our curricula).

Recommendations for Decision Makers and Scholars in ASEAN Universities

Decision makers in higher education institutions in ASEAN universities should renovate their systems entirely to be prepared for future challenges in the AEC. Besides, their competencies, tactics, and capabilities to manage and deal with resistance to change should be highly considered in their agendas. Optimizing the small

parts of each educational institution could lead to a successful endeavor, rather than developing general maps or structures for the organization as a whole. Moreover, it is always wise to distinguish between the different types of stakeholders and shareholders, and consider their interests before attempting to adapt/adopt strategies or policies that are likely to exhaust individuals and fail to accomplish the desired outcomes. It was obvious throughout this study that it is difficult to reach consensus over particular concepts or perspectives to internationalize an educational institution. Therefore, the researchers of this study strongly recommended a high degree of flexibility among decision makers and policy-makers to satisfy the interests of different quarters, individuals, or governments, and to avoid potential conflicts. Furthermore, culture preservation, and people's customs and beliefs in all ASEAN countries should not be in conflict with new educational trends. Hence, efforts should be made to identify and communicate the different sets of values, beliefs, and customs to all individuals in ASEAN educational institutions to avoid problems.

For scholars, the door is opened to investigate countless controversial issues in the AEC era. One apparent gap in the literature is how to develop practical codes of ethics in higher education institutions in the AEC. In other words: What criteria should be taken into consideration when developing ethical standards and protocols in the AEC era? Another area of study could be the different public perceptions in ASEAN countries about the future of this region. Perhaps an important question in many people's minds is that: will specific countries in this region be given the absolute power and be superior to other countries in the AEC? If so, then which

country/countries will take the lead? How are other countries going to react to the classification of the 10 ASEAN members? If particular nation(s) in the region will take the lead, will that be a hurdle to foster unity, prosperity, and peace across the 10 countries? How can ASEAN governments tackle issues regarding ethnocentrism, prejudice, and discrimination to develop egalitarian societies, where everyone is treated fairly and given equal opportunities to promote harmony and peace? Will classification of the 10 countries affect trade and economic policies in the region? Will human rights associations reconsider human rights principles in the region? Briefly, numerous approaches, strategies, beliefs, and paradigms need to be investigated to add to the bank of knowledge in this part of the world.

Conclusion

This study was about internationalizing RMUTL in the AEC era to examine the factors that can assist in the internationalization process of RMUTL. The researchers of this study are hoping that the comprehension provided will assist RMUTL executives, as well as other universities in Thailand and in the ASEAN region, with their internationalization venture. Apparently, the researchers believe that internationalization is a philosophy that must saturate all parts of higher education institutions from the summit to the base.

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