University Partners for Academic Leadership (UPAL): A Cross-National Model for Facilitating Higher Education Reform in Developing Countries

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INTRODUCTION

In 1996, Thailand's *Eighth National Education Development Plan (1997-2001)* called for the nation's 24 public universities to become "autonomous" by the year 2002. Although universities would continue receive budgetary assistance from the government, they would have greater flexibility in managing their own affairs—be it financial or administrative—as well as in determining their own academic direction. A few months later, however, the Asian economic crisis began in Thailand, and since then, the ability of Thai universities to achieve the quality indicators described in the *Eighth Plan* has declined significantly. As Boston College's Center for International Higher Education observed, "Thai universities can expect to cope with more stress, more staff pressures, and larger classes in the years to come. Universities will need stronger human resource development and better professional training of existing staff" (Center for International Higher Education, spring 2000).

With their new independent status, Thai universities will be subject to public accountability procedures to ensure that they provide quality education and research. For example, Thailand's Ministry of University Affairs recently established an independent agency, the Quality Assurance Center, to ensure that public universities maintain high academic standards. In addition to making the shift from centralized, bureaucratic control to self-governance, Thailand's universities are also confronting the following issues: budget cuts; hiring freezes; shifts in student enrollment; unclear educational aims; and changes in university administration, organization, and infrastructure.

In response to this situation, the College of Education at Washington State University (WSU) created University Partners for Academic Leadership (UPAL). UPAL is a consortium of nine Thai universities—seven public and two private—and WSU that is dedicated to collaborating to facilitate higher education reform in Thailand. The remainder of this paper describes the UPAL

approach to illustrate the role a U.S. institution can play in facilitating higher education reform in a developing country. The paper concludes with five prescriptions for effectively facilitating cross-national higher education reform.

PERSPECTIVE

Funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, UPAL sponsored a Leadership Institute at WSU (May 12-31, 2002) for the presidents and two vice presidents at UPAL institutions. (Most of the vice presidents were in the areas of planning and development and academic affairs). The presidents attended for eight days (Session 1) and the vice presidents for 16 days (Session 2). During the overlapping segment of the Institute (May 16-19), the presidents (1) communicated to their vice presidents the leadership insights they derived from their institute experiences and (2) outlined a strategic plan to be developed by the vice presidents during Session 2.

The Institute focused on strategies for developing "autonomous" universities as outlined in Thailand's *Eighth National Education Development Plan (1997-2001)*. The *Plan* addresses six dimensions of higher education reform: (1) quality and excellence, (2) access and equity, (3) efficiency and accountability, (4) relevance and delivery, (5) internationalization and regionalization, and (6) privatization and corporatization.

THE UPAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

The UPAL Leadership Institute gave participants opportunities to interact with their counterparts from other UPAL institutions and from WSU. During this time they were able to test new ideas and develop new strategies for leading their institutions into the future. A key benefit of the Leadership Institute was the opportunity for participants to interact among themselves in a "neutral" setting and to develop short- and long-range strategies that position the UPAL institutions to provide national leadership for the reform of higher education in Thailand.

The Leadership Institute provided participants with a high quality executive-level professional development experience. Through a unique blend of interactions with their counterparts at WSU, opportunities for dialogue and reflection, and visits to academic and administrative units at WSU, UPAL participants acquired knowledge and skills to enhance their ability to provide effective, visionary leadership at their home institutions. During the Institute, participants learned from their counterparts at WSU about strategic planning in areas such as quality assurance, efficiency and effectiveness, human resource management, staff development, performance assessment, and funding.

RESULTS

The UPAL Leadership Institute had three specific outcomes. First, the participants developed the following mission statement for UPAL: "UPAL is a consortium of Thai and U.S. universities committed to serving as a support mechanism to facilitate the reform of higher education in Thailand in the following four broad areas: (1) academic programs for students, (2) institutional

development, (3) staff development for faculty, and (4) leadership development for administrators" (see Figure 1).

Second, participants at the Leadership Institute developed a "charter" which was signed by the nine university presidents and the president of WSU. The UPAL Charter states, in part, that "UPAL is based on the premise that each UPAL institution has capabilities and expertise that will enhance the quality and capacity of other institutions in the consortium . . . . members are committed to the following values and processes: collaboration and teamwork, diverse thinking, group decision making, and loyalty and trust across institutions."

Third, at the end of Session 2, participants from each UPAL institution presented their strategic action plans in five key areas. After each plan was presented, participants critiqued the plan and offered suggestions for improvement. The following sections outline the five plans.

I. CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION (INCLUDING E-LEARNING AND DISTANCE EDUCATION)

Objective 1: Provide learning opportunities through a variety of instructional technology (IT) modes
Strategies:
     a. Utilize collaborative IT learning and share remote resources among UPAL institutions
     b. Develop e-learning modules suitable for East-West style of learning
     c. Promote the results of effective online learning through conferences
     d. Encourage positive attitudes toward IT adoption among faculties and staffs

Objective 2: Establish standard/common courses among UPAL institutions
Strategies:
     a. Enable credit transferring among UPAL institutions
     b. Set up common criteria for credit transfer

Objective 3: Encourage collaborative programs
Strategies:
     a. Share expertise and learning and teaching resources
     b. Establish split-type degree programs
     c. Initiate joint degree programs

II. INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES

Objective 1: Promote global awareness through international exchanges
Strategies:
     a. Communicate via technology
     b. Create database and web page for exchanges
     c. Organize joint research programs, seminars, and workshops
     d. Accept transfer credits from other UPAL institutions according to accepted policy

III. NETWORKING

Objective 1: Strengthen the UPAL Consortium
Strategies:
- a. Establish UPAL Board of Directors
- b. Create Steering Committee for the UPAL Consortium
- c. Spread the "UPAL concept" to upper-level administrators
- d. Continuously link member universities through various reform-oriented activities

Objective 2: Share resources among member universities
Strategies:
- a. Develop student and faculty exchange programs
- b. Create joint curricula/degree programs
- c. Conduct collaborative cross-institutional research
- d. Share learning and teaching resources

IV. STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND MENTORING SYSTEMS

Objective 1: Broaden the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of human resources
Strategies:
- a. Establish a system for UPAL staff development
- b. Create standing committee for staff development
- c. Provide opportunities for personnel exchanges among UPAL institutions
- d. Set up needs assessment processes for administrators, colleagues (academic and non-academic), students, and others
- e. Create collaborative activities—e.g., UPAL short courses, training, conferences

Objective 2: Build effective teams at UPAL institutions
Strategies:
- a. Create "entrepreneurial venture" teams
- b. Maximize the benefit of networking
- c. Establish UPAL Networking Institute for participatory leadership development
- d. Create a peer mentoring system

V. ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Objective 1: Develop proficient English usage for cultural and linguistic exchanges, academic and communication needs, and scholarly work (publications, presentations, proceedings, and discussions)
Strategies:
- a. Enhance diversity through cultural and linguistic exchanges
- b. Promote UPAL collaboration to strengthen English proficiency
- c. Standardize English curriculum and instruction
- d. Encourage the use of English as the primary medium for communication among UPAL staff and students

Objective 2: Support cultural exchanges and diversity through language
Strategies:
      a. Arrange cultural festivals such as American and Thai dances, foods, literature, and festivals so that both languages can be part of the UPAL culture
      b. Organize academic conferences among UPAL institutions on topics of mutual interest such as agro-industry, biotechnology, management of academic institutions

Objective 3: Promote collaboration in strengthening English proficiency
Strategies:
      a. Establish cooperative programs with WSU's Intensive American Language Center for curriculum, instruction, and training for UPAL students, staff, faculty, and administrators
      b. Create exchange programs with WSU for English training
      c. Set up UPAL English language and writing centers at one university in Thailand
      d. Share resources for English language proficiency among UPAL members

Objective 4: Standardize English curriculum and instruction
Strategies:
      a. Design English courses and programs at UPAL institutions in Thailand to be in compliance with those of WSU
      b. Align curriculum and instruction at UPAL institutions Thailand with that of WSU, to be used as a guideline in transferring and assessing English proficiency in courses and programs at UPAL institutions

Objective 4: Encourage the use of English as the standard medium of communication among UPAL staff and students
Strategies:
      a. Deliver short courses at English language and writing centers in Thailand
      b. Provide professional services for publications and presentations

CONCLUSIONS

The reform of higher education in Thailand and other developing countries will take years of intensive effort—Boston College's Center for International Higher Education (winter 2000) has estimated that the process will take ten years. Accordingly, the overall goal of UPAL has been to integrate the processes of reform-oriented networking into the culture of higher education in Thailand. To collaborate cross-nationally to integrate these processes into university cultures requires a commitment to five processes of change facilitation:

1. Sharing resources and expertise across institutional boundaries
2. Developing long-term, collegial problem-solving teams at participating institutions
3. Job-alike exchanging of ideas and strategies across national boundaries
4. Clarifying institutional vision, mission, and values statements
5. Receiving ongoing technical support (and encouragement) for participating in reform-oriented activities

The successful implementation of the preceding five strategic action plans will have far-reaching impacts on higher education reform in Thailand. For example, the emphasis UPAL has placed on staff development, particularly the creation of doctoral programs for current university administrators, will eventually broaden the pool of individuals in higher education who possess the doctoral degree; currently, only 22 percent of teaching staff in public universities and 8 percent in private universities hold the doctoral degree (Office of the National Education Commission, 1999).

While the challenges that must be solved in facilitating higher education reform vary from country to country, these challenges are remarkably similar, and there is much that administrators and faculty can learn from their colleagues around the world. As the nations of the world continue to become more interdependent, cross-national partnerships such as UPAL will play an essential role in addressing the complexities of change in higher education settings.

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Office of the National Education Commission (1999). *Education in Thailand 1999.* Bangkok: Office of the National Education Commission.

Figure 1

University Partners for Academic Leadership (UPAL):
A Model for Facilitating Higher Education Reform in Developing Countries

Curriculum Development

English Language Proficiency

International Exchanges

Academic Programs For Students (Clients)

Support Services

Marketing

Information Technology/Distance Learning

Information Networking

Networking

Institutional Development

Strategic Planning

Budgeting

Research

Fund Raising/ Development

Outreach

University Partners for Academic Leadership (UPAL)

Staff Development for Faculty

Inservice Workshops

Doctoral Programs

Cross-National, Collaborative Research

Performance Evaluation

Mentoring

Strategic Planning

Leadership Development for Administrators

Human Resource Management

Training in Change Facilitation

Doctoral Programs