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Original Research Article

Ongoing policy reform in Thailand's Initial Teacher Education curriculum: incomplete policy borrow

Abstract

This article reports on a review of Initial Teacher Education in Thailand's Rajabhat universities conducted in 2016/17 and the subsequent national initial teacher education curriculum reform drawing on the review's findings and recommendations. The research was conducted in three interconnected phases. The first included a review of secondary data made available by the sample Rajabhat universities (n=5) and the Thai Ministry of Education. Phase two included a period of fieldwork in Thailand during which the research team collected data from officers of the Ministry of Education (n=6), university senior managers (n=38), initial teacher education course leaders and academic staff (n=54) and student teachers' (n~125). During the final phase of the research the research team liaised with a series of Thai stakeholders (e.g. the Teacher's Council of Thailand) to confirm matters of accuracy and disentangle local custom and practice from national policy. A key recommendation of the research was to consider reducing the length of the undergraduate route into teaching and ensure trainee teachers spent time in school in each on the four years of their course. Since the report policy changes have been implemented across Thailand's initial teacher education landscape including the recommended reduction in initial teacher education course length from five to four years in March 2019.

Introduction

The research consultancy reported in this article was jointly commissioned and funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Thai Ministry of

Education. The review began with an initial focus on the preparation of trainee school teachers' in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, English language teachers and, vocational teachers. The review was set within the overall context of Thailand 4.0 [1] which is a national industrial development plan designed to lift Thailand from a middle to high-income country.

The Thai government in May 2016 unveiled Thailand 4.0[1]. This industrial policy is intended to complement the wider 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan, for 2017–21, and fit more broadly within the government's 20-year National Strategy 2018-2037 [2]. Thailand 4.0 specifically identifies 10 's' curve industries for development: initially Agriculture and Biotechnology, smart electronics, affluent medical and wellness tourism, next generation automotive, food for the future, secondly biofuels and biochemical, digital economy, medical hub, automation and robotics, and, aviation and logistics. The research focus on STEM, English and vocational teacher initial education has obvious links with the s curve industries listed above and potentially a facilitator of the government's national ambitions. Despite this initial focus during pre-field work discussions with the Thai Ministerial team (and in particular the then Deputy Minister of Education) the focus very quickly shifted to a more holistic review of initial teacher education in Thailand's Rajabhat universities. The then Deputy Minister of Education, asked for a broader 'first thoughts' review of teacher education in general. The Deputy Minister was very clear in his thinking:

"The country's (Thailand) spending on education is among the highest in the world as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product. Yet our young people are not doing as well as they should. It can only be the quality of teaching that lies behind this under achievement." (Dr Teerakiat Jareonsettasin, 2016)

At the time of the research the recently published Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment¹ (PISA) data [3] identified Thailand as a country with a mean performance share of top

¹ The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a global review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in member and non-member nations intended to evaluate educational systems by measuring 15-year-old school pupils' academic performance in science, reading and mathematics.

performing students below the OECD average (OECD average: 15.3%, Thailand 1.7%) [3:44] . The data also showed Thailand having a share of low achieving students above the OECD average (OECD average: 13%, Thailand 35.8%) [3: 44].

Table 1: Snapshot PISA data on performance in science, reading and mathematics (2015)

	Science		Reading		Mathematics		Science, reading and mathematics	
	Mean score in PISA 2015	Average three-year trend	Mean score in PISA 2015	Average three-year trend	Mean score in PISA 2015	Average three-year trend	Share of top performers in at least one subject (Level 5 or 6)	Share of low achievers in all three subjects (below Level 2)
	Mean	Score dif.	Mean	Score dif.	Mean	Score dif.	%	%
OECD average	493	-1	493	-1	490	-1	15.3	13.0
Singapore	556	7	535	5	564	1	39.1	4.8
Japan	538	3	516	-2	532	1	25.8	5.6
Estonia	534	2	519	9	520	2	20.4	4.7
Chinese Taipei	532	0	497	1	542	0	29.9	8.3
Finland	531	-11	526	-5	511	-10	21.4	6.3
Macao (China)	529	6	509	11	544	5	23.9	3.5
Canada	528	-2	527	1	516	-4	22.7	5.9
Viet Nam	525	-4	487	-21	495	-17	12.0	4.5
Hong Kong (China)	523	-5	527	-3	548	1	29.3	4.5
B-S)-G (China)	518	m	494	m	531	m	27.7	10.9
Korea	516	-2	517	-11	524	-3	25.6	7.7
New Zealand	513	-7	509	-6	495	-8	20.5	10.6
Slovenia	513	-2	505	11	510	2	18.1	8.2
Australia	510	-6	503	-6	494	-8	18.4	11.1
United Kingdom	509	-1	498	2	492	-1	16.9	10.1
Germany	509	-2	509	6	506	2	19.2	9.8
Turkey	425	2	428	-18	420	2	1.6	31.2
Trinidad and Tobago	425	7	427	5	417	2	4.2	32.9
Thailand	421	2	409	-6	415	1	1.7	35.8
Costa Rica	420	-7	427	-9	400	-6	0.9	33.0
Qatar	418	21	402	15	402	26	3.4	42.0

[3:44]

Thailand's Rajabhat universities – formerly called Rajabhat Institutes – have their heritage in their original role as teacher training colleges. In 2005 King Bhumibol Adulyadej collectively conferred the title of university on the Rajabhats' which in English could be translated as 'King's College' or 'Prince's University'. There are currently 38 Rajabhat universities across Thailand offering a range of undergraduate and post-graduate degrees. Despite recent policy moves to diversify their curriculum offer many Rajabhat universities are still dominated by applied social science subjects and teacher education in particular.

The Thai government's desire for a review of Thailand's initial teacher education model, leading to policy recommendations, is part of a long line of curriculum reform in Thailand's education system. Successive attempts have been made to modernise pedagogical practice in schools and promote higher attainment amongst Thailand's children and young people (see: Hallinger and Lee [4]; Hallinger and Bryant [5]; Fry and Sangnapaboworn [6] and Faikhamta, et al. [7]). The basic

school curriculum in Thailand is a 12-year core curriculum including a nine-year compulsory curriculum.

The focus of this review on initial teacher education reflects the view of the ministerial team that given Thailand's history of reform in schools the country's relatively poor performance in PISA must be about the quality of teachers rather than what is taught or the schools physical estate and should be seen as part of an evolving initial teacher education policy landscape where change is ever present (see for example Mattavarat, et al., [8] and Siribanpitakib [9]).

Research design

The sample of Rajabhat universities had been selected before the research process began based on their willingness to participate, their history of initial teacher education provision and their geographical position across Thailand. (Two Rajabhat around the Bangkok metropolitan area, one in northern Thailand, one in southern coastal Thailand and one in the north-west.)

The Ministry of Education team and the Association of Rajabhat Universities had agreed the sample during the period of negotiation with the British Embassy in Bangkok about the practicalities of the initial teacher education review e.g. available budget, project time line, access to the university staff and students, and the precise focus.

The research was conducted in three phases beginning with a period of secondary data analysis around initial teacher education nationally and specifically at the five sample Rajabhat universities. At the time of the research each of had significant initial teacher education programmes (typically 100+ new trainee teachers' per year). The first phase also included grey literature outlining the evolution of the initial teacher education curriculum and its alignment with the 'license to teach' standards dictated by the Ministry of Education and administered by the Teachers' Council of Thailand [11]. The licence to teach requirements had resulted in a wholly uniformed approach to teacher education across the sample Rajabhat universities and Thailand's initial teacher education providers more broadly with all routes into teaching following a five-year

undergraduate programme of study. In this mandated initial teacher education curriculum trainees' spend the first four years studying a university based curriculum including a discipline major (e.g. mathematics), teaching skills (pedagogy) and in the first-year general studies [11]. The fifth year is spent on teaching practicum (sometimes referred to as a 'teaching internship') usually in a single school where a series of observations to assess teaching competence are made (often by academic staff from the University's discipline area rather than qualified teachers from the Faculty/School of Education). In reviewing the literature and in pre-fieldwork virtual conference meetings with staff from the Thai Ministry of Education, the British Embassy Bangkok and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London it was clear the review purpose was to support Thailand in its attempt to raise both education levels amongst young people and support the foundations for Thailand 4.0 at a national scale.

Phase two of the research included a period of intense fieldwork in Thailand during which the research team collected data from officers of the Ministry of Education, including the Deputy Minister (n=6), Rajabhat university senior managers and leaders (n=38), initial teacher education course leaders and academic staff (n=54) and student teachers' (n~125). The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format usually with groups rather than individuals. The only exception to this were the interviews with senior university leaders that were done individually. Typically, the student teachers' were interviewed in groups of around 15 to 20. The interview meetings with trainee teachers were sometimes in mixed year groups where volunteers had been sought and on other occasions were held immediately following the research team observing a specific taught session (often an English language class).

The final phase of the research, done remotely, saw the research team liaise with a series of Thai stakeholders (e.g. the Ministry of Education and the Teacher's Council of Thailand) to confirm matters of accuracy and disentangle local custom and practice from broader national policy.

Result and Discussion

Data

During the period of fieldwork the curriculum issue most commonly raised was the national mandatory five-year standard for all teacher education programmes with the final year teaching practicum. The overwhelming majority of the students interviewed believed they could meet the required national teaching standards [10] within a four-year programme. The students also suggested this overall reduction in course length could be achieved by introducing periods of school placement in every year rather than a single full-year practicum at the end of the course.

Many academic staff involved in initial teacher education programmes (n=54) and their students (n~125) commented on how introducing school practicum at an early stage in the programme would provide scaffolding for lessons on teaching skills; particularly in addressing the student questions around “why do we need to do/know this?” Initial teacher education course leaders and academic staff commented on how leaving all the teaching practicum experience until the final year of the programme had led to some students struggling to contextualise their university based pedagogical curriculum in years’ 1, 2, 3 and 4. A number of staff teaching pedagogy modules commented that the current system meant they were unable to use the trainees experience (as teachers) as a pedagogical tool to frame their teaching studies courses. It also meant trainee teachers’ were unable to ‘try out’ the pedagogical techniques they had been studying and see whether they had currency for them. Three initial teacher education lecturers mentioned the particular difficulties in developing a sense of teacher ‘identity’ in their trainees without the opportunity for the trainees to teach and engage more widely in the teacher professional role. Other lecturers talked about the importance of developing ‘teacher presence’ in their trainees commenting on although they could provide sessions on technique, body language and the use of voice the trainees could not practice these technique in a timely way to develop their confidence and competence as teachers. This is also a reflection on Thailand’s very managerial approach to initial teacher education [12] rather than the more ‘craft’ model advocated by those who see initial teacher education as essentially an

apprenticeship [13]. Thailand's managerial approach to teacher education highlighted by Vibulphol [12] also reflects the cultural value placed on the university led first four years of the initial teacher education programme. The fifth year characterised by its informal support offered by departmental colleagues. The importance trainee teachers' place on this informal guidance offered by classroom practitioners during periods of teaching practicum is clear in a range of international studies comparative studies. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 93 % of the teachers surveyed mentioned having participated in —Informal dialogue to improve teaching [14].

Talking with Rajabhat senior managers, initial teacher education course leaders, academic staff and students we (the research team) were unable to discover a strong pedagogical justification for initial teacher education programmes in Thailand being five years in length. A small but significant number of academic staff (~10%) and a smaller number of students did think the five-year curriculum was appropriate as it added 'maturity and a reflected credibility' with older school pupils they may have to teach as newly qualified teachers. One senior manager suggested far from being reduced from five to four years initial teacher education courses should be extended to seven years bringing them in line with medicine. The manager believed the esteem medical doctors enjoy in Thailand would be shared by teachers entering the profession if their degree programmes were of a similar length.

During the discussions about curriculum and structure the course leaders, academic staff and students raised the level of student teachers' curriculum discipline timetabled sessions (e.g. Mathematics, Science, Language, etc.) relative to time spent on pedagogical study. This was a major issue for those trainee teachers who saw their future as teachers in the secondary and high school phases of education i.e. teaching their academic discipline in high schools. There was some debate from all groups about the current focus on promoting English language for communication, and a concern that this emphasis needed to be balanced by policies that ensure students are supported in obtaining discipline expertise (for example in science) through instruction conducted in the Thai language. As mentioned earlier the promotion of STEM subjects and English language competency is linked very closely with Thailand's overarching economic development initiative Thailand 4.0 [1].

Policy recommendations and implementation

Following the research a report (Atkin, et al. [15]) was presented initially to the Deputy Minister of Education (2016) and then in its final form to a wider audience of university leaders and member of the Teachers' Council of Thailand at the *Teachers' Professional Development: Competency Framework* conference held at the British Ambassador's residence, The British Embassy, Bangkok in February 2018 introduced by Thailand's Minister of Education. In the report [15] Atkin, et al. made a number of policy recommendations to address the structural points raised by staff and students in the Rajabhat universities highlighted above. These included:

Consider Reduce the length of course from five years to four years full-time study (with teacher candidates choosing to enter either early childhood / primary or secondary programmes, and teaching practice beginning in year 1 (although this initial placement may be observational in character), building year on year throughout the four years). [15: 7-8]

Following the publication of the review [15] the Minister moved quickly to reduce the length of the initial teacher education course from five to four years. The Minister issued a decree in March 2019 instructing all universities to reduce the course length and confirming that the 'license to teach' standards of the course could and would be met within the new course framework [16]. This reduction in course length reflects the views of the majority of student teachers interviewed as part of this study and those in other recent studies e.g. Chailom in 2019 highlighted that in her study the vast majority (75%) of the student teachers she interviewed said they would prefer a four year programme [17].

What was not included in the Ministerial decree was any guidance to universities on introducing teaching practicum earlier in the course or focussing the course on specific phase requirements (early years, primary, secondary and high school also one of the recommendations); both recommendation linked to the reduction in course length [15]. The universities offering initial teacher education courses response has been mixed in terms of introducing earlier teaching practicum and seeing this as an integral

part of the earlier stages of the programme. If the recommendation had been fully adopted it would, in my view, address both the structural issues raised by staff and students and, allow trainees an opportunity to reflect on their career choices and decide whether teaching is really for them before getting to the final year of their initial teacher education course [14]. Some providers were early adopters, starting a process of curriculum reform before the ministerial decree was issued, and saw the opportunity to move away from a final year teaching practicum as an opportunity to align provision more closely with the recently agreed Southeast Asia Teachers Competence Framework [11]. The ASEAN framework shown in Figure 1 below suggests a much more integrated relationship between university based initial teacher education and school practicum. Indeed the framework suggests that it is important that trainee teachers need to engage with a process of reflection to know themselves as professional educators and importantly needs of the community they serve. Specifically how their role as a teacher compliments the educative role of the community and the needs to the community. A cultural theme taken up in the 2019 Ofsted school inspection framework in England [18] which stresses the importance of a curriculum that reflects the needs of the community which the schools services.

Figure 1. Southeast Asia (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Teachers Competence Framework. [11]



Other Thai ITE providers have adjusted the length of the course from five to four years but chosen not to fully integrate teaching practicum earlier in the course. Many have chosen a more nuanced approach that will see year one, two and three trainee teachers attended smaller (one or two week) blocks in university demonstration schools or other schools in their placement network group as observers (but not taking the role of teacher). This will go some way to address the difficulties trainee teachers and academic staff raised about the lack of opportunities to practice the teaching skills being studied although as an observer the trainees may be lucky to observe or unlucky and miss the opportunity to observe the pedagogic technique(s) studied in their classes at the University. This is still some way from the integrated practicum we recommended in our report [15: 7/8). Other initial teacher education providers said they were currently unable to provide practicum opportunities during the first three years of the new course because of timetabling difficulties. They were however encouraging trainees to look for opportunities to spend time in school during the portion of university holiday time which overlaps with schools being open. Currently the Thai university year runs between August and May with a semester break around December (in line with most of its ASEAN neighbours) with the school

year running between mid-May and mid-March (avoiding April, normally Thailand's hottest month). Several initial teacher education providers suggested that their existing teaching practicum network was currently too small to accommodate a flow of student teachers from all four years groups and therefore were not planning to introduce earlier practicum opportunities. These providers stressed the need for change in the way schools viewed trainee teachers. The schools themselves would inevitably have to take on a more significant training role with trainee teachers from each of the four years visiting their schools for practicum experience. This is a very different prospect for head teachers who previously have only taken final year student teachers for the whole of their fifth year; in many ways an extra teacher for the year. The relationship between schools and initial teacher education providers should be seen as complimentary with each providing valuable knowledge and skills in the formation of Thailand's teacher workforce i.e. not relying on a taught university experience.

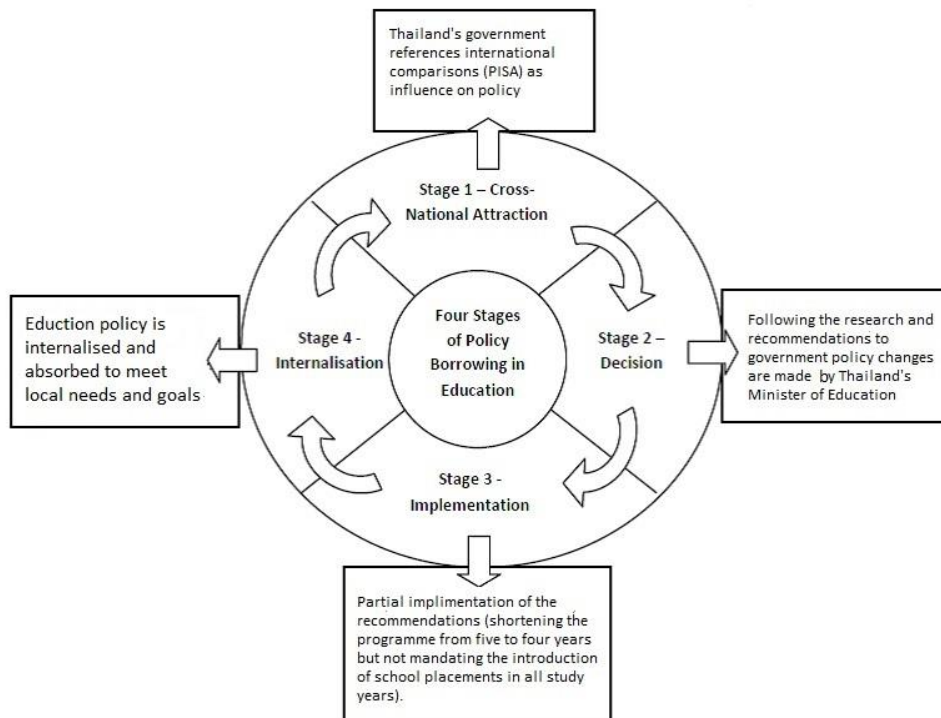
Some initial teacher education providers also made the point that because their student teachers work with other academic schools within their university to acquire their discipline knowledge breaking up the courses to fit in with multiple teaching practicums would be very difficult or impracticable because of fixed assessment points and regulatory contact hours in these other academic schools. The reliance on student teachers joining single honours undergraduates in discipline based academic schools to acquire their curriculum knowledge (e.g. mathematics, geography, history, etc.) was not really considered in the report [15] and will need a shift in power between Schools of Education and discipline schools if the position is to change. This may change organically or be mandated by the Ministry of Education through the Teachers' Council of Thailand if momentum builds for a more integrated approach to school practicum. Particularly if students begin to gravitate towards programmes that have teaching practicum opportunities from year one.

What is clear is the policy recommendations made by Atkin, et al. [15] have only been partially operationalised where local actors have seen the merit in fully integrating teaching practicum into the newly mandated four-year course. Phillips and Ochs saw

the risk of partial policy implementation in their four-stage approach to successful policy borrow suggesting a necessary cycle consisting of four stages: 1. Cross-national attraction, 2. Decision, 3. Implementation and 4. Internalization/Indigenization [19]. The cross-national attraction stage begins with impulses that spawn this attraction, such as internal dissatisfaction, political imperatives, or 'negative external evaluation.' In this case, 'negative external evaluation' stemming from its recent poor performance in international education surveys [20] e.g. the OECD's PISA [3] outcome provided the desire to seek cross national policy attraction. Having commissioned the report conducted by Atkin, et al., [15] the decision to adopt parts of the report were quickly taken (e.g. reduce the length of the undergraduate initial teacher education course and provide a simpler graduate route into teaching). The implementation phase followed with changes to government guidance and a ministerial decree. The operationalisation of these changes by initial teacher education providers has been varied and contextually shaped. Phillips and Ochs [19] also discuss these national and local filters which often distort and alter the original educational policy intent. The internalisation/indigenisation phase is also referred to be Phillips and Ochs as the 'domestication' of education policy [19: 780]. The borrowed policy becomes internalised. This is where the policy becomes absorbed and repurposed to meet local goals and reflect local culture (custom and practice).

As a summary, please see Figure 2 below which presents Phillips and Ochs' model as a diagram with the four stages shown using examples taken from the Thailand's recent initial teacher education policy reforms.

Figure 2: Adapted from Phillips & Ochs [19] Policy Borrowing Model



Conclusions and further recommendations

It is clear from the literature and our fieldwork that curriculum reform in Thailand's schools and initial teacher education programmes is likely to continue its recent trajectory of incremental adjustment for the foreseeable future. This further education reform will be driven partly by external matrix (e.g. PISA results and comparisons with other neighbouring ASEAN countries) and the internal policy agenda designed to lift Thailand from a middle to high-income society (e.g. Thailand 4.0). The importance placed on the s-curve STEM subjects by the Ministry of Education is only going to grow as the relationship between Thailand 4.0 and all phases of education becomes clearer in policy terms. At the time of this review of initial teacher education, the ministerial focus was firmly on university departments delivering the graduates needed to realise economic and societal transformation at the heart of Thailand 4.0. In the years to come the focus must transfer to the early, primary and secondary phases of education where Thailand's future graduates are nurtured.

Since the ministerial decree in 2019 [16] all universities have responded by reducing the length of their initial teacher education programmes from five to four years.

Although this was a key recommendation of Atkin, et al.'s [15] report the recommendation was closely coupled with the recommendation to integrate teaching practicum for trainee teachers across all four years of the new curriculum. This second recommendation has been less universally implemented with major differences between institutions with many providers still offering little opportunity for trainee teachers to spend structured time in school as they progress through the first three years of their initial teacher education programme. This leaves in place for many student teachers the structural difficulties raised by staff and students in the research about the place of teaching practicum as a framework for their university based pedagogic learning.

The policy changes recommended in Atkin et al.'s, report [15] have been implemented partially with the change in initial teacher education course length being operationalised but crucially not in mandating the associated policy shifts. The crucial relationship between these policy recommendations within the report (course length and early integration of teaching practicum) have been lost in the implementation and internalisation phase of Phillips and Ochs [19] policy model. As the policy shift(s) continue to be absorbed and repurposed across the range of initial teacher education providers in Thailand it is certain the recommendations will continue to be culturally aligned to the Thai way of doing things.

It will be interesting to see whether the complimentary policy recommendations within the report [15] discussed above are incrementally applied having moved to legislate on the bigger structural issues. Nearly four years after the initial fieldwork in Thailand and despite significant criticism of the policy shift to shorten the initial teacher education programme by many in Thailand's Rajabhat universities [21] it is a policy position I still recommend and support.

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