

UNDERSTANDING THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PREPAREDNESS FOR UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: Universities can improve their output (and standings) by looking closer at their inputs. Better-prepared students can utilize the opportunities presented, positively challenge Faculty and represent their institution as professionals in a productive manner. Thus, tertiary education stakeholders can identify areas that need addressing by looking at Thai students' preparedness for university. This semi-exploratory study uses a mixed-method approach, including a survey of undergraduates at one Thai university, a focus group, interviews with two university students' parents and the author's experience. Students need better information about programs and universities, with most still relying on friends and family to make their selection. Online information seems general and does not provide the individual touch required. Thorough self-assessment is limited, with students trusting their elders. Societal pressure is great; thus, following what others do takes precedent; hence few learners take a gap year or enter university later in life. Program inflexibility (for example, credit transfers or changing majors) means students stick to programs that they are uncomfortable with. Thai universities need greater outreach as personal contact is crucial in students' selection. Hence, supporting connections with relevant online information, onboarding and pre-university activities. Programs and universities appear to put their interest rather than the students, with students unable to change programs after entering. Program flexibility is necessary to accommodate learners who realize they may be suited for something else. Parents have an outsized influence on students; thus, educating parents is also required. More information on post-secondary education is needed, such as technical qualifications instead of degrees. A more holistic approach to preparedness is needed to have a more meaningful impact from university graduates.

Keywords: Student preparedness, Thai universities, pre-university

Introduction

We investigate how Thai university students are prepared for university and to what extent this preparation is adequate. We then offer suggestions that may help stakeholders deal with the preparation given to students before they enter university.

Lecturers in Thailand (and other countries) experience many students being unprepared for the level of work required at university. Not just academically (reading, writing, technical knowledge) but also in aptitude (curiosity, willingness to seek out information, read outside class material and general interest in learning). Currently students are accepted into program they are not suited for which have been made worse by the pandemic. Entry requirements by most universities in Thailand have been

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lowered in 2022 (Bangkokbiznews.com, 2022). Other researchers have echoed these sentiments (Butrymowicz, 2017, Hassel & Ridout, 2018) in Thailand and other countries. This investigation hopes to add to understanding the reasons so stakeholders can better prepare students and deliver more appropriate material.

Experience in the business world shows that proper onboarding can significantly increase the productivity of new employees (Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013). Applying a similar principle to students gives a structure to understanding participants' performance in universities. Reliance on family, friends and the secondary system to prepare students might be hopeful. However, by clearly communicating what university life (academically, socially, and personally) entails and its requirements (aptitude, attitude), undergraduates may better be able to evaluate themselves and prepare for a major transition phase of their lives.

Better prepared students are more likely to learn more and get the most out of university life while becoming lifelong learners (Rainie & Anderson, 2017). Learners benefit and Faculty as more engagement, interaction, and transactions are possible. Lecturers can be assessed better as student feedback is more focused on commitment. Administrators can enforce the standards required for acceptance into programs. Quality education requires the three main stakeholders to prepare adequately for the journey. Thus, this paper addresses one component of the education triad: how students prepare for university and how this process can be improved.

Literature

There is a paucity of literature on Thai students' preparation for university, searching both English and Thai databases. What literature that exists is geared related to English language abilities. Sittichai (2012) mentioned that some Thai universities have a pre-university program geared towards readying students for university life. Passaporn (2011) found that Thai students in Japan were poorly prepared for adapting to university life and sort console with their peers. Besides language and a new country, coping strategies to deal with new teaching methods, lecturers' approaches, expected knowledge of the subject and accessing support were not there (Passaporn).

Jeotee (2012) found that admission testing at Thai universities needs strengthening, which matches the researcher's experience between 2017 and 2019 as an admission committee member. Thus, there has been research for some time now showing that Thai universities need to do more with incoming first-year students.

On average, between 2016 and 2020, about 50% of high school students entered university (NSO, 2022). This increase in numbers is matched with the rise in the number of universities (and branches) and a declining birth rate (NSO, 2022). For example, the Rajabhat and Rajamangala institutes gained university status in 2005, adding 47 universities to the Thailand tertiary system. Before upgrades, the Rajabhat were teacher training institutes, and the Rajamangala were focused technical institutes. However, Tentshol, McNeil and Tongkumchum (2019) showed that 24% of students drop out of university. The changing demographics (fewer young people) and the number of available places mean that universities accept students who may not be suited to their programs. Thus, more focus is needed on preparing those students that may choose to enter university.

Kitsawad (2013) did not mention career guidance and available programs as factors in Thai choice of university but rather atmosphere and reputation as the foremost factors. However, the focus on atmosphere and reputation may cloud the realities of the impact of other factors in being ready for university.

McDevitt et al. (2013) found that students at international high schools have a fair idea of the expectations of what jobs they want and the preparation needed to achieve their goals. This hints at differences in teaching support and parental involvement students receive at secondary school contribute to learners' preparedness.

Not only in Thailand, the problem of preparedness exists. Colleges in the USA also face similar issues for similar reasons (Butrymowicz, 2017). Remedial courses exist to compensate for the shortcomings, but these courses divert resources and, in some cases, discourage students from pursuing the degree program itself. Re-examining testing (SAT, ACT and others) is one way USA colleges are looking to gauge students' readiness for tertiary education (Chen, 2021).

I experienced the gap in students' expectations of learning at university. This dissonance is interpreted as unfavourable since, for students, perception is their reality. The gap of what to expect is shaped by knowledge gained before entering tertiary institutes. Learning is more independent and may not be as much "fun" as before. Reducing the gap in expectation and what is delivered at university may be essential in student preparation.

Methodology

This semi-exploratory study uses a mixed-method approach, including a survey of undergraduates at one Thai university, a focus group, interviews with two university students' parents and the author's experience. Some of the questions asked are shown in the Appendix section of this paper. A mixed-method approach was deemed most appropriate because:

- The existing literature shows that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are appropriate.
- Due to the paucity of literature specifically focused on Thailand, a mixed approach might give the authors a better guide for data collection in future research on the topic.
- Also, a mixed approach would help explain the numeric findings (from descriptive statistics) in this case if students' rationale cannot easily be quantified.
- Personal experience, in this case, is relevant to contextualize findings and better weave the story together. collected between September and October 2021. This teaching university's academic year is November to October and focuses on teaching, not research.

The population used in this research is the bachelor's degree students studying at a University in Bangkok, Thailand. Using Taro Yamane's formula (as cited in Israel, 1992), approximately 400 respondents are needed to support a 95% confidence. However, this number was not reached due to

time constraints, online teaching, and other factors. Therefore, students were asked to volunteer to participate in a focus group when filling out the questionnaire. Eight students participated in the focus group, which included a 75-minute group discussion and two follow-up statements by students to clarify what they wanted to say. The focus group was conducted in Thai and English to give the students room to express themselves. A translator was used to help the researcher understand the idea being transmitted.

I interviewed two parents to help understand the preparation of students, confirm what was said and clarify what the students reported—also, having parents' perspective give roundness to the study by acknowledging the many parties that contribute to the decision-making process.

Stewart (2020) mentioned that personal stories could function as a frame and bring context to academic writing. Chenail (1997) too wrote about the value of industry experience providing a role in research where shared understanding can lead to a better exploration of the topic. Working in tertiary academia since 2016 and having an international education (Trinidad, Jamaica, UK, and the USA) have help given me insight that is rarely published in academic literature. With a stepdaughter who had gone through the process of preparing, experiencing and leaving tertiary education in Thailand, I know how to contextualize what students are saying. Personal experience cannot be replicated, but the content should not be minimized by acknowledging it and providing a framework for future research.

A simple approach to the analysis was chosen because of the exploratory nature of the research and to give a greater voice to the participants. In addition, the researcher believes that the recommendations are better grounded and more applicable to future users.

Findings and Analysis

Survey Results

Students appear to have little guidance entering universities, with many first- and second-generation attendees. The limited advice is compounded by majors influenced by parents, family and society rather than students' interests or abilities.

Where did you get information from about university life?

คุณเรียนรู้เกี่ยวกับการใช้ชีวิตในมหาวิทยาลัยมาจากที่ไหน?

56 responses

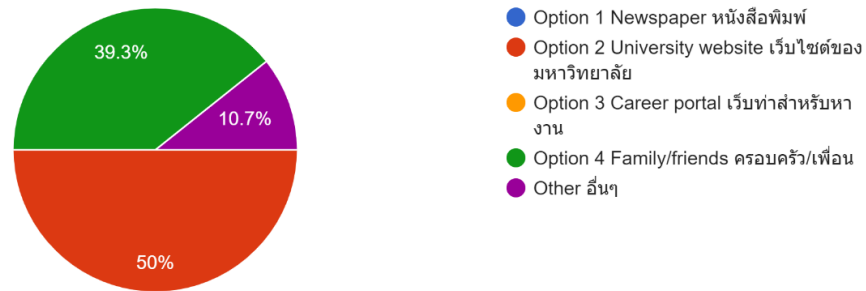


Figure 1: Sources of information for university life

University websites are the primary source of information about university life for most (Fig. 1). The websites are seen as a source of comprehensive information thus what information is not listed is not needed. This information deficit may play a part in the difference between expectation and reality of university life.

How did the university application process contribute to university preparation?

ขั้นตอนการสมัครเข้ามหาวิทยาลัยมีส่วนช่วยในการเตรียมตัวเข้ามหาวิทยาลัยอย่างไร?

54 responses

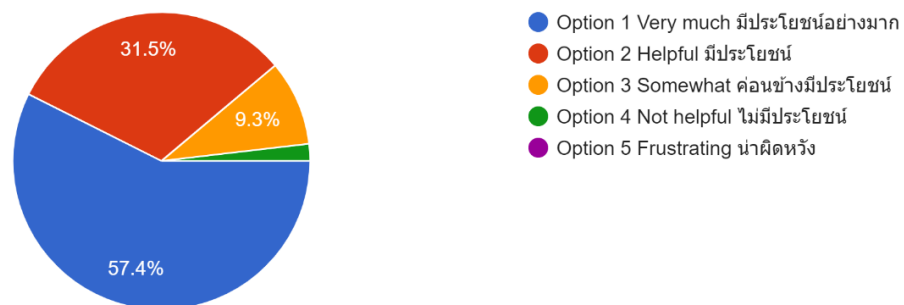


Figure 2: Views of the application process

Students see the application process as helpful in understanding what to expect at university (Fig. 2). This process involved meeting with lecturers and existing students in some instances. The application process also involved an interview thus students were able to ask questions, though from the researcher's experience, few did.

Do you think that you were prepared for university? คุณพร้อมสำหรับการเข้ามหาวิทยาลัยแล้วหรือไม่?
56 responses

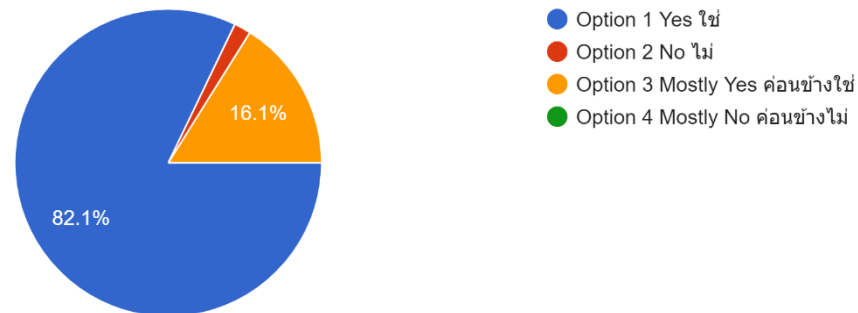


Figure 3: Views of pre-university preparedness

Students reported being prepared for university (Fig. 3), however, their belief of what preparation is required may be questionable. This is seen from the focus group responses that suggested before university they students felt prepared but on entering, they realized they were not. This optimism is reflected in the survey results.

The focus group

The focus group was the most information-rich of the data gathering. Six students participated in the focus group for the full one and half hour's discussion. In addition, several others came and went during the online meeting. The meeting was conducted in both Thai and English.

The students generally supported what was seen in the questionnaire in that universities were chosen mainly due to proximity to home and knowing someone that went to the university. Students suggested that universities push themselves and programs more to the parents. As students believe that their parent knows more, and children should listen to their parents.

Cost also played a part but was not discussed much. This absence is interesting as the cost is rarely a factor mentioned when discussing Thai universities. The importance and awareness are there, but discussions (at least before COVID-19) were limited at universities or in newspapers. More investigation is needed into why.

Parents know what they want for their children, but matching their ideas into what program and university offerings is difficult. Parents are very influential, with most students trusting, listening and not wanting to go against their parents. A gap year will help students figure out what they want but are afraid to do so as parents and others might think of them as failures. A student representative said:

Students will be able to find what they really need. And does not cause suffering or being forced to learn what they are interested in, Not what their parents wanted or what society wanted.

Thai universities offer internships that are mostly three to four months long. Focus group participants were unanimous that they wanted a more extended internship. More apprenticeship so they get time to better understand what they want and use what is learnt. Afterward, students want the flexibility to change their programs later. In some cases, the internship is in the program's last year, so there is little room for change. One student said;

I wish I had someone to guide me, it's only in the final year I did the internship and realise what I was doing, but it's too late to change.

When students choose a faculty and program many times, they are not fully aware of the program details and flexibility. However, the Faculty think students know what they are getting into. A student representative said:

The university should provide everything for its students. And gives students the freedom to choose what they want to learn. This will enable students to discover themselves.

Universities can do a lot to help students understand what university life is like. More open houses, career days, field trips and push to the parents on what the university is offering. Universities need to reach out to high schools more with more significant interactions offering learners knowledge of universities. Some universities in Thailand have associated high schools but this may be limiting their outreach as the source of entrants is available.

Parents' response to decision making

Two interviews were done, lasting 60 minutes and 35 minutes, respectively. One parent was present in her daughter's online classes, which the researcher was teaching. The other parent consulted the researcher while advising her daughter on university enrolment. The parents were asked similar questions to the students, such as how universities can better prepare students for tertiary education and how students can better prepare for university. The parents' role was also discussed as they significantly impact the choices made.

Parent One: Parents' first contact with the university is via the professors; therefore, that contact must be positive. Universities need to reach out to high schools and say what the expectations for students are. More external outreach is needed—for example, advertisement outside of Bangkok and in a larger range of cities.

Parent Two: Parents depend on the education system to guide students. Parents, however, need to find out early, in high school, what universities offer and what is expected. Little details are given about programs offered and options in studies so parents can help their children. The cost of attending university is a significant factor but little is discussed, such as scholarships and payments.

Neither parent went to university though parent number one had some tertiary education due to her work requirements. However, both showed strong dependence on what was told to them by professors and the university—not questioning what was given to them. This reliance on the university and its representative highlighted the importance of having a comprehensive guide for those considering the

university. And having personnel who can discuss the nuances of the program with aspirants and their proxies.

Personal observations

An interview is part of the admission program to many Thai universities' programs. As part of the interview panel for three years, one question asked was, "why do you want to do this program?" The answer was often, "my parents suggested that I do this program." Another question was, "what do you know about the program?" Unfortunately, the students did not know much about the program. They knew the university because of its reputation but lacked details.

This limited interest is visible in class during teaching via class participation, quality of work submitted and general demeanour. These students, in some cases, held back others. For example, teaching in business degree in English, many of the students did not want to read, talk or practice as required. As a result, class discussions were limited. The prepared and genuinely interested students in the program were willing to put in the effort required.

Our program did two outreach programs per year on average between 2016 and 2020. And all but one of those outreaches were in Bangkok province. The information available on the school's website was limited and mainly in Thai though the program billed itself as international and wanted to attract non-Thais. The faculty knew the mismatch of goals and actions, yet little was done to address the issue. Possibly because the program attracted its quota and responsibility was not clearly defined.

Possible Model

One model is shown in Fig. 4 below, where two tracks are available to students. The traditional route is still promoted and encouraged though other routes are possible. Most Thai do not appear to enter university later in life with undergraduates in the 18-24 age range. Very rarely outside this range due to limited options and social factors.

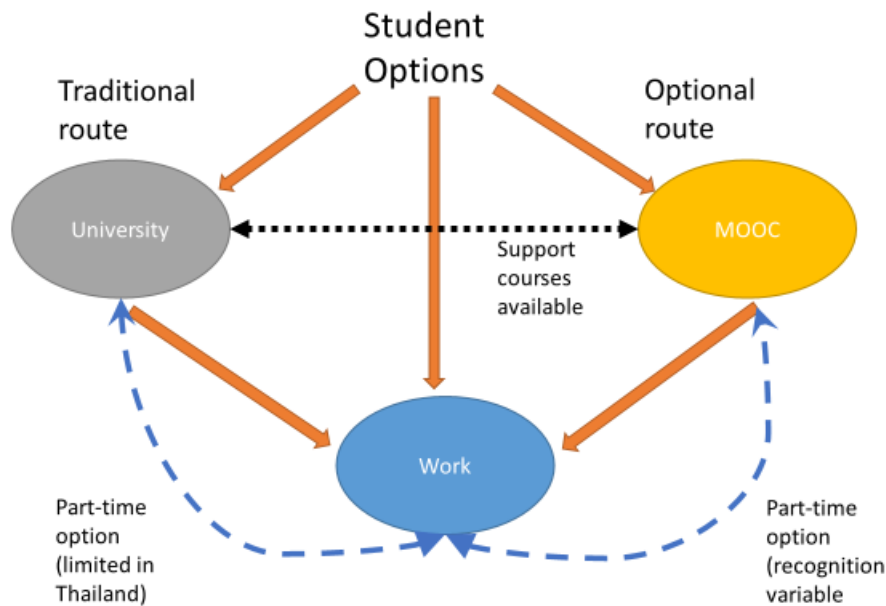


Figure 4: Possible Model of student options

Awareness of options helps in students' decision-making. However, this awareness is not there as learners are not told about these options as pathways to achieve similar goals. Higher education must be seen as a multi-pathway journey with various intersections leading to positive employment; that is, professionals are using the skills learnt in a field that requires those skills.

A fluid system would allow students to leave high school, start working and do online courses and then enter a program to strengthen their academic skills before re-entering the workplace. Or allow students to start a degree, take a break to work for a year or two and resume their studies in a field more suited to their desires. Credit transfer, program descriptions, and course accreditation would require more attention and controls to maintain a quality education. But these issues are being raised without the flexibility the model suggests.

Recommendations

Students need better information about programs and universities. The amount of information provided on websites appears sufficient by covering the main areas. However, a student wanting more details, such as program flexibility, scholarships and so on, cannot access this information. Website responses are limited, and the frequently asked questions section is absent. Telephone calls are the primary way to access information. Detailed information, when available, is in Thai, not English; thus, prospective non-Thai students are thus reliant on personal contacts rather than an informed search.

Open house days where students visit the university should be held more often (once a semester) so that more aspirants can interact with existing students to better understand the options available. Roadshows as well need a broader geographic coverage. Increase outreach might cost the university, but the returns would pay off with the quality of students entering the program.

Programs need flexibility. Currently, in 2021, most Thai undergraduate programs offer little flexibility in terms of administration and course content. There are few part-time undergraduate programs available. The two universities, Ramkhamhaeng and Sukhothai, offer open programs, which are online programs that students can take part-time. Other major universities offer open online courses, but these do not lead to a degree and operate ad hoc.

Greater flexibility with credit transfer would also help students wanting to change programs. If a student wants to change university or program after two years, he or she must start from year one in another program. Some universities offer a maximum of eight credits, equivalent to two courses. This rigidity confines students to a program in terms of cost, time and social stigma. By allowing greater credit transfer, especially with the same university, students can better enrich themselves, satisfy family obligations and continue learning with major

Even within programs, the course content is relatively rigid, with students offered few elective courses outside their faculty or domain. For example, a business student cannot take an introductory engineering or art course. As a faculty member, the researcher has brought up program flexibility and exposure to other faculties with little actionable results. Some Thai universities have tried offering more integrated degree programs, for example, Chulalongkorn University's, BASci degree. However, students are not encouraged to explore and develop their intellectual curiosity. To satisfy their desires as students enter programs to satisfy their parents, not themselves, in many cases.

Educating parents is also required as they influence their wards significantly, and in many cases, they have not been to university. Parents mentioned talking with university lecturers and trusting what lecturers told them. Personal contact is thus a crucial factor in the decision-making and preparation phase for students. Parents trust the system to guide their children, but ideal preparation is impossible with an information deficit across all parties.

Greater use of pre-university onboarding workshops would help with student preparation. Despite Sittichai (2012) mentioning the benefits of such programs, the uptake is still limited. None of the three Thai universities the researcher has worked at offers a one- or two-week program where students are informed of the expectations of university life. Thus, the first semester is spent acclimatizing while expecting to learn. Having an onboarding program would help with student preparation even though relatively late, as they can learn university life processes before subject content.

More information on post-secondary education is needed, such as technical qualifications instead of degrees. As suggested by the model, integrating microcredits and online courses into degree programs would help students who may not want or are prepared for tertiary life in its current form. The idea is not new, even in Thailand and recently gained momentum of sorts BrandAge Online (2020) at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi. However, the role out, uptake and support are limited. Thai universities are still blinkered in thinking. By offering the option to students, better preparation can be had. A more mature, enthusiastic and knowledgeable applicant to university would help their classmates and lecturers by bringing directiveness to the classroom.

Future Research

Looking at how learners are prepared for work while at university is a natural extension of the study if the idea of a degree is to prepare a person for the workplace in addition to intellectual development. Also, extending the research to how post-graduate and adult learners are prepared for future learning would show the continuum of the impact of education preparation.

This continuation of the research may indicate that in Thailand, a degree functions as a bridging program. Moving from school to work and then later to further study once a career path and level of maturity (or awareness) have been reached.

Future research should include more focus groups and mixed methods approach for data gathering as there appear to be differences between survey answers and detailed discussions.

Conclusion

Thai university students are generally inadequately prepared for university despite their initial optimism. However, tackling the problems requires a holistic approach incorporating students, parents, lecturers and universities. Involving these main stakeholders is a start to having a more flexible and open approach to tertiary education. Students are strongly influenced by their parents; thus, universities need to provide relevant information to both parties. Using websites, field visits and onboarding programs will help the quality of preparation students get and need to be successful. The better quality of the input, the more lecturers can deliver, and society will benefit from the output. Tertiary education should not be limited to the present high school to university route but include many tracks, including online courses, microcredits, and program transfers.

A more holistic and flexible approach to preparedness is needed to have a more meaningful impact on university graduates and those seeking tertiary education in Thailand.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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