

## How Thai Universities Can Better Prepare Graduates For The Workplace

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### Abstract

Thai universities play a crucial role in preparing learners to be productive members of society. This study looks at how universities prepare students for work and what can be done to improve the process. Using a mixed method approach involving a survey of university students' opinions, a focus group of hiring managers interviews, and interviews with lecturers, a holistic view is achieved from the main stakeholders. The stakeholders show significant dissonance among expectations. These differences stem from many sources, mainly, the lack of shared and open information. Students enter university without a clear goal or a realistic informed prospectus. Lecturers try to bridge the gap between what is expected to be delivered and what industry needs. However, lecturers are working against a tide of reluctance from students' aptitude and abilities, faculty realities and fractured industries that do not share. Human resources personnel seem not to have a clear idea of what is expected from graduates, especially in a dynamic environment. What employers want varies widely, making training difficult. Even when students enter the workforce with the creative energies required, the established systems stifle growth. Having greater interaction among the parties would help reduce the differences in expectations. The interactions need to be continual throughout the students' time at university. Flexible programs and more internships would allow students to better understand how what is taught can be applied. Lecturers would have access to more relevant data and with class discussions being more informed. Companies can structure onboarding programs better as students would have experience an introductory phase. More exchanges among stakeholders are required.

**Keywords:** Student employment, Thai universities, Employability, Dynamic environment, Stakeholders, Lecturers.

### Introduction

The author investigated how Thai university students are preparing graduates for life after university and to what extent this preparation is adequate. By looking at the three main stakeholders, students, lecturers and employers a fairly rounded picture of what needs to be done can be achieved. Then offer suggestions that may help students, lecturers and others prepare the next generation of workers. Career guidance ideally supposed to start before university and refined while at university resulting in workplace readiness. Through undergraduate years students can reassess their interest, abilities and prospects

to be better suited as future professionals. Universities also add skills, knowledge and access to networks to help build a rounded professional. Adhering to this ideal is not always possible. Mncayi (2021), among others earlier, show that graduates skills and jobs do not match in many cases. Graduates are employed but need to be trained to meet job specific needs. Some companies (Deloitte, Google, Amazon, and the like) do not require a degree anymore. Arnold (2021) mentioned that 40 percent of US graduates are underemployed and short-term credentialing may help. Many factors contribute to

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this mismatch, such as, information availability, influence of parents, knowledge of lecturers/advisors and the pace of the evolving job market. This discrepancy between graduates and jobs exists worldwide and needs attention. Several programs at Thai universities now include a semester internship (usually in the first semester of the fourth year) to prepare students for the workplace. To what extent these internships are effective have not been measured in Thailand but have been found to be effective in the Philippines (Bawica, 2021). There has been a shift towards looking past just employment but also to employability as the job market becomes more dynamic. Jobs that exist now, such as Youtuber, did not exist before 2009, though the platform was founded in 2005 (Wikipedia, 2023). Other jobs such as social media influencer and content creators also have become viable income earner with the rise of social media since, tentatively, 2010. Skrbiš and Laughland-Booÿ, J. (2019), among others, suggest that many jobs will no longer exist in the future and a certain career malleability is needed, that is, graduates need to be flexible and adaptable. By addressing the alignment of stakeholders wants, needs, perceptions and relationships, university graduates can be better equipped for their future. Thus, hopefully, making university graduates more suited for workplaces, universities more relevant and companies more productive.

### **Literature**

There is a paucity of academic literature on Thai students' career guidance with existing research focusing on the high school level. This dearth of literature may help explain why this research is needed and why anecdotal evidence point to students' unsure nature and resulting learning problems. The author's experience supports these anecdotes, and this research would provide substantive support. Ghuangpeng (2011) also found that Thai students do not have the resources or awareness about career guidance as compared to their Australian counterparts. Supporting the idea that resources are either absent or not accessed. Providing the tools to make better work choices are important but accessibility is also important. Sittichai (2012) found that students enrolled in

programs they did not want as a reason for university dropouts. Most of the dropouts Sittichai looked at re-enrolled in other programs more suited to their liking. Making these switches becomes more difficult at work where the pathways are not clearly laid out as curriculums are. McDevitt et. al. (2013) found that students at international high schools have a fair idea of the expectations of what jobs they wanted, and the preparation needed to achieve their goals. This hints to differences in teaching support and parental involvement students receive at secondary school contribute to learners' preparedness for university and careers. Ayodele (2019) classed the factors that influence career choice into five factors: intrinsic, extrinsic, career exposure, influence of third party and financial. These broad categories are useful in managing the factors which are near universal; personal choice, surroundings, exposure to career, the role of family and the need money. Ehrmantraut, Pinger and Stans (2020) showed that in Germany, the awareness of tertiary students are not much different from Thailand with expectations in many areas (salaries, work life, qualifications, and so on) not grounded in reality. Fried (2020) mentioned on the role of colleges "whether and how to enable today's college students to aspire and work hard enough to acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions to adequately prepare them for life after college." Colleges and universities have a role in preparing students for the future however this future is uncertain thus the motivation to learn and acquire new skills are even more important now in the 2020s. Besides academic literature there are many news articles and magazines articles on the skills gaps and deficits of university graduates. Wiley (2021) digital skills gap index indicated that Thai graduates are ranked 78 out of 134 countries in digital readiness. Mncayi (2021) showed that the skill gaps exist in other areas and in other countries too. Arnold (2021) raised questions on the need for a degree and proposed having other credentialing instead. Thus, the role of universities, is questioned worldwide and for various (but similar) reasons. Employability of graduates and employment of graduates are different. Cheng, et al, (2022) showed that employability must be seen from the different stakeholders not just from higher edu-

cation perspectives. For this paper employability is defined as the students having the abilities and aptitudes to meet the needs of the workplace. This definition is similar to Smith (2010) definition of "the relative chances of acquiring and maintain different kinds of employment." Whereas employment is defined as having a job. Preparing students for the workplace means focusing on employability.

### **Methodology**

A multiple qualitative method was used to collect data expanding on the approach used by Wattanacharoensil et al (2019). Data for this research was collected over five phases. First, a questionnaire with both open and closed ended questions were distributed at one university during September to October 2021 with 56 respondents focused on preparation for university and work. The researcher then moved university. Undergraduates' views preparation for the workplace was initially gathered. A focus group of eight students was also conducted and interviews with two parents done. The research portion on preparation for university was presented at the ICEDU 2022 (Carrera, 2022) and provided a guide to the other phases of data collection. The second phase a questionnaire with open ended questions were distributed to 60 employers at an exhibition in June 2022. A total of 44 questionnaires were completed with the researcher interviewing four managers responsible for hiring new graduates. In the third phase a revised questionnaire was distributed to persons directly responsible for hiring using university recruitment job fairs and emails. 34 completed questionnaires were completed with three interviews. These were collected in February March 2023. Final year students at the researcher's present university were asked their views on how university has prepared them for work. Considering that all the students had at least four months internship, they were aware of the workplace and requirements. Similar to some of the students at the first university, who were undergoing workplace learning. Only six complete forms were available. Finally, lecturers' views were also solicited, again with an open-ended questionnaire. Four participated. Though the lecturers were working all full time at one university, they had experience at oth-

er universities thus were able to give a broad view of students expectations over times and place. Representatives from the three main stakeholders in tertiary education are represented in the data collection process. This triad are the one directly involved in the experience thus considered crucial. A series of multiple open ended questionnaire was used for several reasons. Firstly, the existing literature show that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are appropriate. Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch, (2018), and De Vos, Jacobs, and Verbruggen,(2021) among other used a qualitative approach. Jeotee (2012) and AIT (2020) used a quantitative approach. Using literature, the researcher tried to find a middle ground with open ended questionnaires. Secondly, due to the paucity of literature specifically focused on Thailand a mixed approach gave the author a better guide for data collection in future research along the topic. Respondents have to think as there are no Likert scale to guide their answers. Respondents gave short answers, but many gave similar short answer thus making quantitative coding and theming possible. Thirdly using mostly open-ended questions allowed for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of results. A happy middle ground. Fourthly by refining questions more details were attained and there is a check on how well suited the original questions were. Though the response rate may be high the number represent the major parties and allow for valid statistical analysis. The population used in this research is the bachelor's degree students studying at two universities. From the author's experience in the Thai tertiary system Thai university students are relatively homogeneous (18-24-year-old age group, mostly Thai, local high school graduates and similar middle income bracket). Other lecturers support this characterization. The research for students' career guidance is part of a wider investigation into the Thai university student's preparedness for university and their post-degree careers. The results from recruiters also allowed for both qualitative and quantitative analysis. As the focus is relatively narrow, recent university graduates, the open ended questionnaire provided apt opportunity for analysing trends, similarities and differences. Examples of the questionnaires used are in the Appendix.

## **Findings and Analysis** **Students' perspectives**

Students are not given the career guidance they need before or during university. Two thirds of the student said they started to think about their careers in high school with parents and teachers having the biggest influence. This might be expected. About half the students had some contact with someone working in the same field as they choose to enter. Again, this might be expected as the influence of someone known in choosing a career. However once at university, students responded that university only somewhat or slightly (66%) helped them for their careers. Over 75% of the students wanted more exposure to professionals; more dedicated classes; workshops and other practical instruction. Many Thai universities have an internship component to their programs over various lengths. IC-KMUTNB, where the author currently is, the internship is four months. However, at a previous university the teacher training program is one year long and considered the final year of the program. Those students felt trapped as it was too late to change careers and they were not given many alternatives. When asked "What skills do you think schools should teach students to make them able to fit into any future career?" most of the students responded with skills that are already being taught. These included "Management Skills, Teamwork, Problem solving Skills, and Social Skills", "communication skills" and interestingly, "How to deal or cope with failure. How to stop or fix the burnout". Students are interested in having guest speakers and more professionals give workshops so they can better understand the relevance on what is taught. For example, student said,

"Invite speakers from interesting companies in the logistics field to lecture about working in various positions in logistics/marketing and other fields so that students can get to know each other and prepare in advance before applying. Find a real job."

which means they want professionals in the logistics field (their major) to visit and help them prepare for the workplace. Students appear to enter university with a moderate idea of what they want, albeit influenced by family and social circles. However once at univer-

sity, students are not able to use what is given or seek more assistance in career planning. There are some disconnect between what is given to the students in classes and programs and what the students receive. Thus, though there are Business or Professional Communication classes these are not seen as related to the workplace and thus the students want and or expect more.

## **Lecturers' Perspective**

Lecturers are aware of their limitations in terms of administrative constraints. As one said, "The Thai universities need to modernize both the curriculum and teaching methods to meet student needs in current workplace environments." Another said, "They should explain career paths practically and completely at a much earlier point in the education, focus more on thinking and soft skills such as adaptability and critical thinking." Thus, echoing some of the students concerns with preparation for career choices early in the program. Lecturers are adapting and slowly moving away from traditional approach. One lecturer reported, "I agree to the concept of student-centered learning. Teachers should act like a coach who give them suggestions." Thus, awareness and willingness to act appears present in the tertiary system.

## **Employers Perspective**

Employers overall have a positive attitude towards recent graduates. Thinking that recent graduates bring skills, openness and willingness to learn to the workplace. However, patience, attitude to work, talking with others, quick to leave and overall lack of commitment to the process of professionalism is lacking. As one employer wrote, "Rarely found the student that want to continue in MSc or PhD, Still not really sure what they really want to do in life, Lacking of English skills." This may indicate the long-term thinking is not there with students and the students are unable to communicate what exactly they want. Which is unfortunate for the students as all employers want students with good communication skills along with being competent with computers. Adaptability and language skills are also high on the desirable skillset. Few (less than 20%) of employers responded with outside the five options given and added critical thinking and negotiation skills. Companies appear to be hesitant to hire students

part time or pay market rates. This is partially because Thai companies are structured in such a way that full-time work is required and pay rates are not flexible for part time work. Three quarters (75%) respondents said outright no to part-time work (for example, "There are only full-time positions available" and "No, would like to get the employee who put all affordable with the job"), such as the student going to school in the morning and working in the afternoon. The others are willing to consider being flexible (for example, "In some positions, this can be done, but depending on the position, performance can be measured by performance, not working time"). Employers appear to flexible in some cases, with most (over 90%) not caring much for the time take to complete the degree with some even welcoming the possibility of added work experience. As one employer said, "there needs to be a balance between study and training." Another however mentioned that "students should keep their focus on studying." Suggesting that students focus on study may be as some companies have their in-house training program for new employees thus the lack of practical awareness is being addressed. Smaller companies may not have this in-house ability. Thus, showing that recruiters at the same job fair are sending conflicting messages to students.

### **Overall**

Having only open-ended questions in a survey, as done for company executives and lecturers in this case, might be described as non-traditional. Also, quantifying codes can be a bit challenging too. The results can appear simplistic. Yet open ended questions do offer depth of understanding. Rouder et al (2021) mentioned some of the "many challenges to analyzing and reporting open-ended data" and suggested some approaches to these issues. The author at this time is unable to use Rouder et al's suggestion but is aware of the issue and hope readers would still get value from what is reported. Wattanacharoensil et al (2019) showed some of the issues with collecting data through multiple means and making meaning for the reader and in their case the wording carried greater explanation than the diagrams.

### **Recommendations**

Mentoring, active academic counselling, and regular career guidance workshops need to be an integral part of Thai universities curriculum. Some universities such as Thammasat have been promoting their alumni through mentoring programs to improve the career success of their graduates (Thammasat 2021). However, Thammasat and Chulalongkorn are top 10 universities in Thailand (Times Higher Education, 2023) but others need to follow their lead. Programs like mentoring would help develop the mindset among students of preparing for the workplace. Students want exposure to relevant professionals and workplace experience. Thai universities are trying to change and deliver more appropriate programs (British Council, n.d.) so looking at the whole person could only contribute to these improvements. Thus, course and programs that addresses education more pragmatically. Lecturers are trying though the results might be uneven. Knowing things need to change and changing are difficult. The slowness of responses might be an issues as wider conditions also changes. By incorporating more professionals to teach part time and facilitating more exchanges between industry and academia, administrators can coordinate parties to deliver more relevant material to undergraduates. Jeotee (2012) found that academic success is not a good predictor of high levels of reasoning and problem-solving ability which are the skills required for companies wanting to be innovative and society overall. Chitviriyakul (2023) highlighted the disparities among graduates, their qualifications and job market requirements. Some of the employers also mentioned something similar. Employer said, "Students high grades do not reflect ability. They like too much drama" (meaning the students think they know and cannot handle negative feedback). Companies need to work with universities so students start developing the maturity and other competences for the workplace. O'Higgins and Pinedo (ILO) (2018) found that "that paid internships lead to better post-internship outcomes". Bolli, Caves and Oswald-Egg (2021) also found that internships improves education and incomes on degree completion. By extending the working period throughout the degree program, universities may not only be helping students but other stakeholders too. Future

employers can have better workers. Universities can have more access to research material. Paid internships can help parents with tertiary education cost. However, the social and cultural issues need to be addressed. There is not a culture of working and going to school in Thailand.

### **Future Research**

More than one student mentioned that there are many other factors for students not interested in internships or working while pursuing a degree. There is the student's financial positions with wealthier students (parents?) not seeing the need for working as a career/employment pathway is already available. Related to is the student's personal background in first generation students may not know how to avail themselves to opportunities at university or work programs. And linked to these two factors is the student's social background. Friends and family influence a student's decisions. Those whose social environment see work as opportunities as educational, income and life improve may benefit more than those students that do not. The social and cultural factors to working while going to school need to be looked at further in the Thai context. Though various forms of continuous education exist in the world, in Thai universities offer these opportunities though there is the push for continuous learning. For example, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Lifelong Learning Centre which offers microcredits and other programs to better adapt students for their career and work. Having more learning opportunities be seen as socially acceptable might be help in overall education and learning. The Vandeweyer et al (2020) pointed out the limited use of part-time programs, even though flexible learning options were available. How career choices affect deciding on post-graduate studies? Are students choosing a post-graduate degree to change to careers they wished for when they were under-graduates is another interesting step along the continuum of learning. Carrera (2022) looked that preparing students for university and thus covering the range of high school to postgraduates in career preparation.

### **Conclusion**

University can be seen as a transition phase in life

where individuals learn the skills and knowledge to aid in their careers. Students enter university without proper guidance thus making tertiary education more difficult than it needs to be. While at university social life, peer pressure and other changes distract from thinking of the future. So even if students are interested in their career and preparing for the workplace, they find it hard to use the resources available. Career guidance, internships and workshops may be available, but more is needed to build a habit of thinking of the workplace. Students need to be curious and seek out opportunities by interacting with a range of professionals and advisors before graduating. Universities need to prepare and or encourage students to be in a mental state where they are eager and able to use the knowledge given. Lecturers are trying to give students what is needed in preparation for the workplace but are facing issues on several fronts. From reluctant students, administration requirement, corporation with companies and their own experience. Thus, lecturers need to step out and be more of a facilitator that also support knowledge growth rather than a knowledge provider. By being more proactive, teachers can stimulate students, get administrators to listen and companies to contribute more positively to the preparation of graduates for employment. Companies need to be clearer on their expectations and what they are willing to give to get functionable, trainable, and productive employees. Also, companies need to contribute to providing situations and guidance for knowledge use, creation and sharing. This can be through more flexible onboarding process, internships and part-time work opportunities. Innovation is required in process, procedures and some cases, structure. The current mixed message from companies makes it difficult for others to plan. Greater stakeholder involvement in the preparation of students for workplaces are needed. The current pool is limited. Parent themselves need to be educated about what is possible. There are strong cultural and social norms that limit innovation in education in Thailand, such as students working part-time or doing a degree part-time. Few universities in Thailand offer part-time undergraduate degrees. Expectations and reality are widely diverse. Greater clarity and simplicity by all parties

would help the stakeholders achieve their overall goals. Students would be making more mature and directed decisions. Lecturers would be able to design courses that encourage using curiosity for problem solving. And companies would have potential employees that need less onboarding time and are more productive.

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