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A culture of ineducation

Re: "Poor English skills could leave Thailand out in cold" (BP, Jan 8).

The best Thai students match top students anywhere in the world. It is preparation of those below the top which rightly worries many. As one closely involved with education in Thailand for many decades, allow me to offer some thoughts about improving outcomes.

Curriculum improvements as PM Yingluck Shinawatra urges, or a campaign to "speak English on Mondays" as the Education Ministry proposes, might bring marginal improvements, but probably not. They fail to address the system's current decisive shortfall: attitudes towards education by students and staff -- at all levels.

Consider my recent experience assisting the start-up of a new doctoral programme at a Thai public university. We had a few really committed students, but many sought only a paper certificate, not genuine knowledge for use. Continuation past coursework to the dissertation stage requires a TOEFL score of 500, which represents the bare minimum of functional competence in English required to conduct research at this level.

At the suggestion of our university president, I volunteered to offer free one-on-one instruction but hardly anyone took up the offer; instead the focus was on workarounds to get the number without the competence. Class attendance records were regularly falsified.

Our Thai instructor in research methodology awarded all 25 of his students a final grade of A- or A, even to the failing and to the one who hired another to sit his exam.

Upon challenge he justified to me his award of the fraudulent A by saying that it was on the conscience of the cheat.

We dismissed him but he continues to teach at another government university. He was an excellent teacher, but unfit by reason of character to improve Thai educational outcomes.

We foreign instructors began to invigilate the exams, resulting in student protests. I have in hand a letter (in Thai) to the university president objecting to the foreign instructors who "cannot understand Thai culture". This Thai doctoral aspirant put the focus exactly right: on the culture.

Without widespread and substantial change in Thai norms about learning, results will continue to be inferior to those of Thailand's peers and of those coming up fast from behind. How to achieve serious change in social norms is well understood but takes time, so anyone serious about improving Thai education may wish to start soon. So far we hear no calls for, nor see any action supportive of, this.

Until such a change happens, returns to other measures like curriculum improvements or better qualified instructors will be limited and often wasted.

Our doctoral programme collapsed in confusion and the involved foreigners have moved on to other endeavours. We cared about education in Thailand and regretted this very much.

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