Education in Thailand:

a retrospective and perspective view

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This paper is divided into three parts.
The first part gives background of Thai education before the Development Planning period up till the present time. The second part presents research findings of “Trends of Formal Education in the Sixth and Seventh National Development Plans”. Some remarks on the changing educational aims and functions are shown in the last part.

Legacies from the Past

A modern educational system had not been officially established in Thailand until the 1870s. Before that time, the family (“ban”), the temple (“wat”), and the King’s palace (“wang”) were the three institutions responsible for the education of Thai children. The family gave nonformal learning and training, basically, on agricultural skills and social skills. The temples provided boys with the basic three R’s in order that they could understand Buddhist principles. The King’s palace provided another kind of education more or less of a manpower oriented approach, with special interest in training young government officials.

The French Roman Catholic missionaries had started a kind of western education in the reign of King Narai (1657–1688) during the Ayudhaya period, but it was not until the nineteenth century that Thai education was modernized. King Mongkut (Rama IV) who reigned from 1851 to 1868, provided the royal children with European tutors and teachers and sent a number of them to Europe to further their studies in various fields with the aim of modernizing the country. His son, King Chulalongkorn of Rama V (1868–1910), followed his path and laid the foundation of modern education system. Initially, his interest and the royal control of education was centered in the palace grounds. Gradually, state control of education was encouraged on a wider basis. The first school was opened in the palace in 1871 to train the sons of princes and high government officials along the western lines. The first government school outside the royal palaces was opened in 1885, two years before the establishment of the Department of Education which later became the Ministry of Education. A few years later, King Rama V, who expressed his view that “All children of my own to the poorest should have an equal chance of education”, issued the Decree on Organization of Provincial Education in 1898. Afterwards, his son, King Vajiravudth or Rama VI, issued the Compulsory Education Act in 1921.

Another point that should be noted is that education during this initial stage of modernization had been used as a significant means to maintain national stability and independence. In fact, it can be said that impetus of Western influence from missionaries and the threatening colonization were among the important factors that brought changes to Thai education.

In 1932, a significant change in Thailand occurred, that is, the change of government system from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy. Following the ideology of the People’s Party, education was seen as a means of furthering democracy by developing an intelligent and literate electorate and as a means of fostering a sense of nationalism. This tone of educational system continued until the end of the Second World War. A great deal of reconstruction had
been done and education was then seen as a means of social and economic development. After becoming a UN member in 1946, Thailand participated in many of the organization's planning activities. As a result, the concept that education is a basic right for all the citizens was accepted and the government pledged itself to fulfilling the expansion targets set for that concept in the Karachi Plan of 1960.

The Development Planning period in Thailand began in the 1960s. Since then, Thailand has engaged itself with "national development". The NESDB (National Economic and Social Development Board) issued its first National Development Plan is 1961. The national educational planning institution was established. (It is now known as Office of the National Education Commission or NEC). The 1960 National Scheme of Education, which had a "national development" tone, was promulgated by this educational planning institution.

Education during the first three National Development Plans (1961–1976) was a social demand and also an appropriate means for changing the knowledge, skills, and values of the people for future socio-economic well-being. The Fourth Development Plan (1977–1981) emphasized the use of education as an instrument for the nation's socio-economic development and also aimed at promoting national identity with particular attention to the Thai language. During this period, the 1977 National Scheme of Education, which is the present scheme, was passed. Nonformal education has been given a great deal of emphasis. At present, it is during the execution of the Fifth Development Plan (1982–1986). Improvement of education quality is being emphasized rather than the quantitative expansion.

One could consider the new National Education Scheme of 1977 as a significant educational reform. The school system has been changed from 4:3:3:2 into 6:3:3 class structure. Compulsory education is six years instead of seven years as it used to be earlier. Curriculum was also revised. The new curriculum aims at education for life and society. Vocational subjects are emphasized in each educational level. At the primary level, subjects are grouped into four areas:

1. Basic skills-Thai language, mathematics.
2. Character development-moral education, physical education, fine arts, musical values and "special activities aimed at enhancing the quality of life".
3. Life experience-social studies, science and hygiene to be taught as integrated studies.
4. Work orientation-agriculture, crafts and trades. English can be offered as an elective in primary 5 or 6.

Secondary education is no longer divided into academic and vocational streams. The content is to be self-terminating as that of the primary level.

Looking into the future

At present, attempts have been made to lay a foundation for the coming Sixth National Development Plan (1987–1991) since this Plan will start in two years. This paper will present the results of the research on "Trends of Formal Education in the Sixth and Seventh National Education Development Plans" which was done in 1984.

The purposes of this study are threefold. First, to study trends of formal education in the Sixth and Seventh National Development Plans (1987–1991 and 1992–1996); second, to analyze development and problems of education during the First to the present Fifth Plan; and third, to propose trends for educational management.

The main concept of the study is the belief that education does not exist in a vacuum. In fact, it is interrelated with what we call "the educational context"—that is, economic, political, social, international and philosophical foundations. Thus, in order to study educational trends, it is imperative that we begin with the study of its context in the above mentioned periods. Afterwards, educational problems and trends will be studied. This concept is shown in the following figure.

Documentary research, open-ended questionnaires and additional interviews with expert were used to analyze the context of education as well as structure and problems of the Thai educational system. The Delphi Technique was utilized as the methodology for studying educational trends. Twenty-nine educators and educational planning were selected. Three rounds of questioning were conducted to study opinions of
### Table 1: Some Remarks on Educational Development Pre- and Post-Development Plan Periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Pre-Moernization</th>
<th>Modernization Period</th>
<th>Development plan Period 1960s-present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td>- Agricultural society</td>
<td>- Agricultural society</td>
<td>1932 government reform</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Absolute monarchy</td>
<td>- Absolute monarchy</td>
<td>Constitutional monarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Buddhism</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>- Education was provided informally through “ban” “wat” “wang”</td>
<td>- Education officially began with royal control on palace schools and state control of public schools</td>
<td>Royal control of education was weakening while the State later took full control of education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Beginning of western education by the French Roman Catholic missionaries</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Aims/Function</strong></td>
<td>“ban” agricultural and social skills “wat” basic three R’s and Buddhist principles (boys only) “wang” trainin young government officials</td>
<td>- Education is a desirable means to modernization (usually refer to as westernization) - produce educated government officials</td>
<td>- Education is an essential prerequisite for democracy - Develop an intelligent and literate electorate - Fostering a sense of nationalism</td>
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### Table 2: Some Remarks on Educational Development during Development Plans

<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td>&quot;National Development” commitment</td>
<td>1973 student uprising</td>
<td>Legacies of 1973 and 1976 student uprisings</td>
<td>Moving from agro-industrial base to a more industrialized economy</td>
<td>Unemployment and underemployment</td>
<td>Continued emphasis on national identity and culture as well as rural development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First Plan emphasized economic development</td>
<td>1976 student uprising Rapid increase of population resulted in family planning campaign</td>
<td>Rural transformation became policy of plan 5 Serious problem of unemployment Promotion of National Identity</td>
<td>No reform in system and compulsory education Education to become more &quot;human&quot; Emphasis on science and technology More private participation in educational management</td>
<td>Better &quot;blending&quot; of modernization and cultural preservation Integration of life, work, and society Emphasis on education for industrialization, rural development, and equal opportunities Development of the quality of life Education for self-employment instead of governmental positions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beginning of desentralization</td>
<td>1975 Education Reform</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>1960 National Scheme of Education was issued by the NEC 4: 3: 3: 2 system 4 years compulsory education Expansion of education Increasing demand for education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education followed the trend set by the Second Plan with more specific objectives and attempts to enhance quality and opportunities - During the end of Plan, &quot;democratization&quot; became strong influence</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
these 29 experts. Statements were divided into four parts, namely, the overview of education, the primary, the secondary, and the tertiary education. In each part, the experts were asked to give their opinions on the emphasis and general condition of education, educational administration and planning, curriculum and instruction. All statements were analyzed by means of mode, median, and interquartile range. Some highlights of the research findings can be briefly presented as follows.

**Context of Education**

**Economic and Development** Thailand is developing from an agro-industrial base to a more industrialized economy. However, the long-neglected agricultural sector will have persisting problems such as poverty, inequality in income distribution, migration of labour from agriculture to industrial sector, and unemployment.

**Politics and Government** Although some problems still exist in the political arena, trends toward more political stability have been predicted. It is noted that frequent changes of government have some effects on the inconsistency of education policies and the quantitative expansion rather than upgrading quality of education. This situation seems likely to persist in the near future.

**Society, Culture and Morality** Thai society and culture are becoming more urbanized and industrialized. Accomodation of traditional and urbanized culture is foreseen in this development. Buddhism will play a more important role in moral development.

**Population and Quality of Life** The population growth rate will decrease but problems relating to the quality of life will persist. The quality of life in the big cities will be worse. Attempts in upgrading quality of life in the rural areas will proceed at a considerably.

**International Aid and Cooperation** There will be closer relations with foreign nations. Finacial aids will more likely be economic loans instead of grants. There will still be foreign influences in many ways. As for education, the concept and direction are partly affected by Western thinking. However, the influences will not be as strong as in the old days.

**Philosophy** Buddhist philosophy, Reconstructionism and Essentialism will play more vital roles in Thai society and education. However, it is felt that the last two philosophies should be integrated.

**Structure and Problems of Education**

The Educational Development Plan was not an integral part of the National Development Plan until the Third one (1972–1976). Two major National Schemes of Education (1960,1977) were formulated during the development planning period. The 1977 National Scheme of Education which, in part, was the result of education reform in 1975 effected changes in many ways. And, although the planning of educational development has become more systematic, many problems still persist. Most of the persisting problems are those already existing in the present plan, namely, inequitable provision of opportunity and inequality of education, irrelevancy between education and its context and irrelevancy within the educational system. There are also problems concerning planning strategies, the lack of unity and coordination in educational administration, resources mobilization, curriculum administration and implementation, and quality of graduates in terms
of their knowledge and employability.

Trends in Formal Education

Overview of Education

Educational Development and Aims

Overall, in the Sixth Plan, the five-year education development plan will likely be readjusted after 2–3 years and consideration of economic, political and social changes in that time will be taken more seriously in the planning process. Rising demand for education will still exist and then in the Seventh Plan, life-long education will be widely needed.

As for the educational aims, eighteen top priorities for education were predicted. The experts agreed that the first-priority emphasis of educational development in the Sixth Plan will be the coordination of education and industrialization. And then in the Seventh Plan, the emphasis will be the provision of additional opportunities for education on a wider basis. Moreover, it is predicted that in the next two plans, education will also emphasize such aims as the enhancement of the quality of education; resources mobilization from private sectors and local communities; provision of education for self-employment, rural development, and national stability. There will also be an improvement in education for the advancement of science and technology, and the upgrading of the quality of life and morality. Yet, it should be noted that the priorities of these educational aims and development in the Sixth Plan are different from those in the Seventh Plan.

General Condition of Education

Trends that will likely happen in the Sixth Plan and will more likely happen in the Seventh Plan are the growing needs for both formal and nonformal education and, at every level, education will be provided more equitably for all citizens.

Compulsory education will still be for six years of primary education. Extension of compulsory education to either lower secondary level or to pre-primary level will less likely occur in the Sixth Plan. However, some experts think that this might happen in the Seventh Plan. Also, the establishment of channels to coordinate formal and nonformal education will likely happen in the Sixth Plan and will most likely take place in the Seventh Plan.

Educational Administration

Trends in educational administration that will most likely occur in both plans are the improvement of development planning and policy formulation and the better arrangement of appropriate educational priorities and expenditures. Decentralization of educational authority to the changwad (province), reforms in administrative structure and system, and mobilization of resources from local and private sectors will likely happen in the Sixth Plan and will be more possible in the Seventh Plan.

Curriculum and Instruction

Better understanding and implementation of the new curriculum will be the trend likely to happen in the Sixth Plan and will be more possible in the Seventh Plan. At every level, adaptation of curriculum in order to integrate science, technology, community development, culture and morality will be increasingly implemented in the future. Measures and procedures to motivate suitable and intelligent persons into the teaching profession, and training of teachers so that, in addition to their teaching expertise in their major fields of study, knowledge in other disciplines will be provided. This measure will be taken to solve problem of a lack of teachers in vocational subjects while there are too many teachers in academic subjects.

Primary Education

Overall, the most likely trends in the Sixth and Seventh Plans, respectively, will be the gradual decrease of new opening positions for teachers and; the ability of the State to provide primary education for every citizen except disadvantaged groups and those in remote areas.

There will be expansion at the pre-primary educational level. Private participation at this level will be encouraged more. At the primary educational level,
Table 3   Comparison of the Experts' Opinions on the Trend of Priorities in Educational Development between the Sixth and Seventh Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority of Educational Development</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Possibility</th>
<th>Consensus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Education for work-self-employment in particular</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Emphasis of the advancement of science and technology</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Promotion of innovation and creativity</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Provision of opportunities for education on a wider basis</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Enhancement of education quality</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mobilization and sharing of resources from private sectors and local communities</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Moral and ethical development</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Education of rural development</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Coordination of education and industrialization</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Education for development of self and quality of life</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Emphasis on graduating &quot;producers&quot; rather than &quot;consumers&quot;</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Education for national stability</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Proper development of national resources and environment</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Cooperation between government and private sectors</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Eastern seaboard development</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Education for economic needs of the country</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Promotion of education in cultural aesthetics</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Possibility of the trend:
the experts are asked to indicate:
5 — D : Definitely will occur
4 — V L : Very likely to occur
3 — P : Possibly to occur
2 — Less : Less likely to occur
1 — Least : Least likely to occur
0 — D N : Definitely will not occur

** Consensus of the experts on the trend:
C : Consensus
N C : NO consensus

Priority of Educational Development Plan Plan Plan Plan Plan Plan Plan Plan

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there will be a smaller number of students due to the success in family planning. This will encourage the enhancement of education quality at this level.

Secondary Education

The most likely trend in the Sixth and Seventh Plans will be the ever-growing demand for education and the over-expansion of secondary education. This over-expansion will cause more demands for admissions to higher educational institution. More secondary education graduates will be unemployed.

Vocational training will be emphasized at this level so that the graduates will be able to get more jobs. The emphasis will be on self-employment rather than government work. Stepping up of science and technology in the content of the curriculum is also predicted.

Tertiary Education

The extension of provision of education will be at the graduate level rather than the undergraduate level in both Sixth and Seventh Plans. Demands for admission to open universities and private institutions will increase. Emphasis will be given to fields of study and subjects appropriate to the economic and industrial development of the nation. At the same time, the preservation of Thai culture, ethics and morality will also be emphasized. Universities in metropolitan areas will continue to seek for academic excellence while local institutions will play more roles in community development.

There might be a reform in teacher education. The experts agree that teachers’ colleges will become more like community colleges in the Sixth and Seventh Plans. Overproducing graduates in academic subjects will still occur in the future. This will be a serious problem since new openings for teachers will decrease gradually.

Ideal Educational Concept

As a guideline for Thai education, the experts were asked their opinions on the ideal educational concept. They agreed that education should be based mainly on Thai society and culture, not an outright imitation of others, especially the Western world. As Thailand is a Buddhist country, Buddhism should play more for a role in education. The concepts of “lifelong education” and “education for life and society” which are emphasized in both the 1977 National Scheme of Education and the Fifth Plan should still be the Thai educational concept.

Some Remarks on Educational Development

Results of this research show that there will not be major changes or reform in the next two National Education Development Plans, with the exception of teacher education. However, comparing with previous plans and development, one can observe shifting emphases in the Thai educational aims and functions. In this paper, I will attempt to analyze and compare the Thai education aims during various development periods briefly as follows.

Pre-Development Plan Period

In the ancient time, Thai education was provided informally through three major social institution, namely, “ban”, “wat”, and “wang”. Although the purposes of education provided by these three sources were different, and educated person from “wat” and “wang”, in particular, gained prestige in the society.

In modern times, during the pre-development plan period, the essence of education has changed considerably. In the beginning, with the royal effort to modernize the country and the threatening colonization, education was officially provided and was seen as a desirable means to modernization. The emphasis was on producing educated government officials. Usually sons of the elite were educated. With the government reform in 1930s, education was then seen as an essential prerequisite for democracy and nationalism. In the 1950s, there was another shift in education. Besides functional literacy, education was regarded as a partner in economic planning. The 1951 National Educa-
tion Plan stated that "the desire for education must somehow be deflected towards that which will contribute to the building of an independent national economy". The educational goals emphasized citizen-ship, training for democracy, vocational training, and sense of national loyalty. It should be noted here that training for a job was henceforth linked with education.

Development Plan Period

It can be said that the general purposes of education during this period were twofold. Education should perpetuate Thai culture and, at the same time, it should provide the necessary knowledge and skills to understand and meet the present and future demands of the country. These purposes are stated in both the 1960 and 1977 National Schemes of Education. However, in the former scheme, there was no real emphasis on objectives of education as a tool for development or for rural transformation or for equalizing opportunities. In contrast, the latter scheme seeks "life-long education" and "education for life and society", and equal opportunity as well. The content and learning process at each level are expected to be functional and self-terminating to ensure that school-leavers at each level will be able to have a livelihood with confidence in their knowledge and capacities. The importance of the family role in bringing up children and youth with desirable character compatible with the Thai way of life is also stated.

As for the five-year National Development Plan, the First Plan (1961–1966) emphasized economic development, especially the infrastructure and the Second Plan (1967–1971) added some social elements in development. Yet, it was in the Third Plan (1972–1976) that the education plan became an integral part. Education during these three plans emphasized growth and expansion in quantitative terms. The first two plans emphasized greatly on producing the middle and high level manpower. The Third Plan's major emphasis was on providing more opportunities for the people to receive education particularly through the expansion of compulsory education from 4 years to 7 years. (The compulsory education was reduced to 6 years in the Fourth Plan) After the student uprisings in 1973 and 1976, there was a shift in education due to the changing social values of Thai society. Besides education for economic and social development, the main emphases in the Fourth Plan (1977–1981) and the present Fifth Plan (1982–1986) were rural transformation, non-formal education, lifelong education, equality of educational opportunity, education for democratization, and sense of national identity. In the future, according to the research findings, there are some interesting points to be observed. For example, provision of education for work and self-employment as well as rural transformation will become increasingly important. Education as a means for enhancing the quality of life will put more emphasis on the moral and ethical aspects instead of the sole economic aspect. Thai values and culture, especially Buddhism, will have vital roles in education. This is very interesting for in the past Thai education has always been influenced by Western knowledge and thinking.

Some of these interesting remarks on Thai educational development during the Pre-and Post-Development Plans are presented in Table 1 and 2.

To conclude, we can say that Thai education is closely interrelated within a larger context. In other words, educational aims and structure have developed in response to the changing socio-economic and political arena. "National Development" is the central theme of the country. But, its meaning and focus are somewhat different from the earlier development plans. From the standpoint of the two general purposes of education during the development plan period, it can be said that the modernization function has always been emphasized and practiced. Nevertheless, the important educational role in preservation of Thai culture, which has previously been somewhat less emphasized, is now actively promoted. A trend towards de-westernization was predicted. Perhaps, in the near future, we will see a better "blending" in Thai education of the necessary modernization function in balance with the cultural preservation function. Whether these predictions will become true or not is yet a matter of "wait and see".
Appendix

List of Experts for Delphi Technique

Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB)
- Secretary-General
- Head, Educational Planning Section, Social Projects Division

Office of the National Education Commission (NEC)
- Vice-Chairman (Also a former Minister of Education)
- Secretary-General
- Director, Educational Planning Division

Office of the Secretariat of the Prime Minister
- Secretary-General to Deputy Prime Minister (also a former Minister of Education)

Ministry of Education
- Minister of Education
- Deputy Under-Secretary of State
- Secretary-General, Office of the Private Education Commission
- Deputy Secretary-General, Office of the Primary Education Commission
- Director-General, General Education Department
- Deputy Director-General, Vocational Education Department
- Director-General, Nonformal Education Department
- Director-General, Teacher Training Department

Office of University Affairs
- Deputy Under-Secretary of State (also a Rector at Sukhothai Thammatirat Open University)

Chulalongkorn University
- Professor, Department of Physics, Faculty of Science
  (also a former Minister of Education)
- Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology Faculty of Political Sciences
- Professor, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts
- Professor, Department of Primary Education, Faculty of Education
- Professor, Department of Secondary Education, Faculty of Education
- Associate Professor, Department of Higher Education, Faculty of Education
- Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Administration, Faculty of Education
- Instructor, Department of Educational Administration

Kasetsart University
- former Rector

Thammasat University
- Professor, Faculty of Political Sciences
  (also Director, Thai Studies Institute)

Srinakarinwiroj University
- Professor, Graduate School of Education
  - Director, Demonstration School

Sukhothai Thammatirat Open University
- Rector (also Deputy Under-Secretary of State, Office of University Affairs)
  - Assistant Rector in Planning and Development

Buddhist Temple
- leading Buddhist monk with expertise in Philosophy of Education

Special Interview

Ministry of Defence
- Supreme Commander and Commander-in-Chief, The Royal Thai Army