

Brief Comments on Doctoral Degrees in Business/ Management, HRD Conducted in Thailand in Recent Years

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I have lived in Thailand for 16 years and I have been involved in academia in Thailand for approximately 20 years. During that time, and particularly over the last 10 years, I have been heavily involved in supervising/advising doctoral theses candidates, in editing doctoral candidate work, and also in the examination of many Thai doctoral degrees in the areas of business/management HRD.

Some of these degrees have been PhDs and others have been DBAs. Some have been undertaken at Thai universities, both government and private, and some have been for Thai students undertaking doctoral degrees from Australian universities in Thailand. All the doctoral degrees with which I have been involved have been conducted in English and so the candidates are required to write their theses/doctoral dissertations in English.

Obviously, I have not been involved with all Thai universities offering doctoral programs in English in management/business HRD but I have been involved in such programs in about five government universities including some of the largest and most prestigious ones and three private universities offering these types of programs in English. I have also been quite heavily involved as a thesis advisor/supervisor in two Australian universities who have offered DBA programs in Thailand.

I have never tried to perform a count of all the students with whom I have been and in some cases, am still involved with in Thailand but it would be well over 50 such students (and probably neared 100!) I have also been involved with doctoral students in Australia, USA, China, and Malaysia, but my comments in this paper are restricted to Thai students.

Probably about half the students have been enrolled in DBA programs and about half in PhD programs. I am well aware of the arguments that say that PhDs are “research” based, whereas DBAs are “professional doctorates” but in my view, there is in reality often not a lot of difference in these sorts of degrees being offered in Thailand. Both PhDs and DBAs include a substantial coursework component, usually lasting one-&-one-half years or two years before proceeding to writing their theses/dissertations.

Business/Management HRD are essentially practical areas and theses topics usually reflect this, whether PhDs or DBAs. Generally, from the topic titles alone it would be extremely difficult to determine whether a work is a PhD or a DBA. Again, generally, PhD theses are expected to be somewhat longer at around 50,000 words (approximately 250 pages) whereas DBAs are around 30,000 words (150 pages) but again, deciding on what is a PhD or a DBA from the word count alone would be quite misleading. Some of my longest theses have been DBAs and some of the shorter ones, PhDs! Another aspect is that generally PhD theses may require more significant levels of research methodology and analysis but even here, it is frequently quite difficult to differentiate between PhDs and DBAs.

Over the last 10 years, I have had the privilege of being involved with and in some excellent PhD and DBA candidates' work but also, with quite a number that are only 'fair' (FAQ!), however, the vast majority of these students have ultimately graduated. As indicated I have also had some involvement with doctoral programs in western countries and the picture in Thailand is not really very different from the pictures in these western countries.

The majority of Thai doctoral students appear to not have great difficulty with the coursework units although, for various reasons, some drop-out at this stage. I have always found this somewhat surprising as some students, when they finally arrive at the thesis-writing stage, have poor, sometimes, very poor English language skills but had obviously satisfactorily completed their coursework assignments in English!

The thesis-writing stage is by far the most difficult stage of the doctoral process. Usually, one finds that the degree is supposed to be completed in three or four years but many Thai students take much longer in writing their theses. The longest I ever had (although I did not become her supervisor until year 8) was one Thai student who took 9 years to complete but I know of many, perhaps most, who took or take 5 years or longer.

In my view, the main problems which affect Thai students are:

English language proficiency. Unfortunately, a good number of Thai students enrolled in English language doctoral programs simply do not have the required skills to write a doctoral thesis in English (or cannot do so without a great deal of support and assistance (my 9-year student fell into this category).

Thai students usually need close supervisor/advisor (hands-on) support while writing their theses. Unfortunately, they do not always get this or even seek this. One problem may be that part-time supervisors receive very little remuneration for theses supervision and full-time academics may not get much allowance for theses supervision. I know as a part-time professor, I receive much greater remuneration from teaching a class (usually 45 hours) than for supervising a thesis student. Indeed, for a 'problem' thesis student I would often spend more than 100 hours over several years assisting that student. Even for 'good' students I would still often spend many hours.

The other major problem that I have consistently found is that many Thai doctoral students have never engaged in any academic or doctoral level or even Master's level research prior to entering the doctoral program. Many are quite 'scared' about doing research. Unfortunately, also, some (although certainly not all!) Universities (both Thai and western) do not provide adequate assistance or coursework units in research methodology prior to or during the thesis-writing stage.

Research methodology is quite complex and if theses students do not have an adequate training or support in this area they will almost certainly have great difficulty in writing a successful thesis.

I am pleased to say, however, that the Burapha University HRD Program does provide a lot of support for their students. Nevertheless, I have found that, even in this program, some students still have significant English language problems.