

THE MBA IN THAILAND WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SASIN *

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We are hesitant to attempt to summarize the entire MBA education situation for the whole of the Kingdom of Thailand. We are but dimly aware of the many vibrant Thai language programmes currently being offered, and certainly not in a position to expound on them in detail.

What we do know is that Thammasat University claims to have established the first full-time MBA programme in Thailand in 1956. Currently, there are more than forty MBA programmes in Thailand, with at least fifteen English-language International MBA programmes. The MBA programmes in Thailand offer a range of durations: two-year, one-year, and part-time programmes are all available, as well as Sasin's own nineteen-month programme. Sasin is the only business school in Thailand with both AACSB and EQUIS accreditation, but two other schools, NIDA and Thammasat, have recently received one accreditation, while other schools are currently going through the accreditation process.

A number of schools offer specialty MBA degrees such as MBA in Hotel and Tourism Management, MBA in Bank and Financial Management, or MBA in Integrated Marketing Communications. A handful of schools offer dual degree programmes, starting with Sasin's two offerings: SSB Dual Degree Programme

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with the Schulich School of Business in Toronto at York University, and the EBS Dual Degree Programme with the EBS Universität für Wirtschaft und Recht in Wiesbaden, Germany. Many schools also have reciprocal exchange programmes with business schools around the world.

That is about the extent of our knowledge of MBA programmes in Thailand, so our focus for the rest of this piece will be on the programmes at Sasin, with which we are most familiar!

Development and Growth

Sasin has developed very much along the lines of well-known MBA programmes, and we think must bear the responsibility of having introduced the American-style MBA into the Kingdom. We believe that we remain the only school to require a GMAT score from all our MBA applicants.

Finding a reputable MBA programme in Southeast Asia in the early 1980s was a challenge. Creating one was even harder! Yet this was the challenge facing Professor Toemsakdi Krishnamra and his colleagues, and the far-sighted business leaders behind the development of Sasin. What's more, the team was under pressure to come up with a demonstrably world-class programme with a minimum of lead time.

In the early 1980s, MBA meant USA. The cooperation of at least one major American MBA programme from the US was essential. Professor Toemsakdi—founder and current Director of Sasin—sent a team US-bound to begin negotiations with some of the top American business schools. His goal from the beginning was to create Asia's leading business school in Bangkok.

US Partners

Quite quickly the Kellogg School of Management at North-western University emerged as an interested party. Kellogg recruited the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania to the team and the historic collaboration among Chulalongkorn (Thailand's leading University) and two of the foremost business schools in the United States was underway.

Jointly, they established the school initially known simply as *The Graduate Institute of Business Administration* (GIBA). On December 5, 1987, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej—on the auspicious occasion of His Majesty’s 60th birthday—graciously bestowed our official name, *Sasin*.

Sasin derives from a combination of two Pali and Sanskrit words: *sasa* meaning rabbit and *indra* meaning chief. So, *Sasin* is literally “Chief of the Rabbits,” a most auspicious name to Thai people since His Majesty the King was born in 1927 which coincides with the ‘Year of the Rabbit’ (in the Chinese-influenced twelve-year cycle).

The development of *Sasin* falls naturally into 4 decades.

1982-1992: The US Collaboration

Initially, the *Sasin* MBA was a carbon copy of the Kellogg MBA programme, offering fewer courses in total, but simply cutting and pasting from the successful Kellogg curriculum. What’s more the entire programme was delivered by visiting professors from Kellogg or Wharton. The programme was structured into 5 week modules: 5 weeks being deemed to be the maximum time that professors could be absent from their home institutions.

It seems, and we have never seen contrary evidence, that *Sasin* originated this visiting professor model, which one of our founding partners, Kellogg, found so attractive that they rolled it out around the world creating EMBA programmes at Tel Aviv, WHU, HKUST, Schulich etc., all modelled on their work with *Sasin*.

1992-2002: Diversification

For the first 10 years of *Sasin*, the Kellogg/Wharton visiting professor model and its borrowed curriculum served *Sasin* well. We were up and running with minimum lead time. We had instant respect and position. We had an authoritative curriculum and a sought after degree. We had traction: but gradually some rough edges started to show.

A simple story will suffice. In Thailand, we drive on the left side of the road. In the US, they drive on the right. On one occasion an American visiting professor looked left first, saw nothing coming, and stepped into the path of an oncoming motor cycle with bad consequences both for the pedestrian and rider. Now, it's probably true that Bangkok traffic is sufficiently chaotic that had he looked right first (as he should), he might still have been struck. But there it was: visiting professor incapacitated, students waiting for the class!

We are not quite sure how the programme muddled through on that occasion. Probably we found a local substitute or pressed an alumnus into service. But the lesson was well learned. There really were differences in operating in Thailand and operating in the US. Those differences were not confined to the operation of motor vehicles, or to caution when crossing the road. Increasingly, we became aware that the curriculum we had borrowed from Kellogg needed some additions and amendments to be truly relevant in Thailand.

At that time, in the early 90's, Thailand was an engine of global business growth. Entrepreneurial opportunities abounded. The need for entrepreneurial oriented courses for advice in managing rapid growth and for human resource management was intense. Now all these topics were indeed covered in our borrowed curriculum. But there was a demand for more depth, and (above all) for more Asian cases and Asian content.

We also started to feel the need for a wider range of inputs, and faculty backgrounds. At the same time, some of the novelty of coming to teach in Thailand was perhaps wearing a little thin for our stalwart visiting professors from Wharton and Kellogg: even those who had not fallen foul of motor cycles! Although we have one visitor from Kellogg who has taught every single class since the programme was established (and continues to teach with us), many looked for other opportunities after 10 years of visits.

Accordingly, our MBA started to diversify. We started looking at high performing visiting faculty from world class programmes beyond Wharton and Kellogg. We started looking for successful educators from outside North America.

At the same time, we started to recruit our own full-time faculty from the world's leading PhD programmes. Those full-time faculty played a role as change agents in installing more Asian content into our increasingly distinctive Asian curriculum.

Our programme was evolving from the USA MBA to a more Asian flavoured programme. Now, we teach about half and half with full-time and with visiting faculty. We welcome faculty, full-time or visiting, from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Israel, Japan, Singapore, UK and (still of course) from the US.

Asian cases and teaching materials continue to be a challenge. As a founding member of the Association of Asia-Pacific Business Schools (AAPBS), we have assisted in the creation of an Asian case clearing house and case-writing initiative. But, frankly, the major source of "Asianization" has been the intensive use of practical student projects. These bring students into contact with real life Asian business problems by creating hands-on, action-learning course elements. These have been by far the most successful elements in giving our curriculum an Asian edge.

Action-learning/project-oriented courses include our Sustainability Practicum (where students work with Asian businesses and NGOs to help develop sustainable initiatives); our Consulting course (*Management Consulting Practices*) where—after some classes on consulting and interviews with leaders of major management consulting companies—students work on real consulting projects for Asian businesses, supervised by staff from Sasin's Consulting Unit; and perhaps most dramatically by the *Global Initiatives in Management* course which sees students study specific business opportunities in a specific country, develop an in-depth understanding of that country, visit the country for on-site fieldwork, and finally write a management report.

2002-2012: Global Recognition

As we entered what seems now to be recognized as the "Asian Century", we became aware of the potential demand from non-Asian students for a thorough grounding in Asian- oriented business. Yet how to demonstrate the quality of our little known (and still quite tiny) school?

Of course we needed to submit to the rigours of international accreditation. We were the first school in Thailand, and one of the first in Asia, to attempt this tortuous route. We started to attempt to jump through the hoops presented by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). At that time, AACSB was still a very US-oriented machine. It had only dropped the A-word—*American*—in 1997: rather cleverly throwing in another A-word—*Advance*—to preserve its acronym.

However, when we first submitted to their tender embrace, their thinking was really very US-centric. The idea of visiting professors coming for 5-week stints was, quite literally, foreign to them. As was the Asian custom of often having multiple, unassociated business schools within the same university. Even the idea that non-English language publications might occasionally carry academic merit! The process of arguing these points and presenting our evidence was long and often gruelling. It was almost retrograde in trying to explain (and even excuse) the evolution of our initially US curriculum to encompass Asian realities.

What was truly impressive however, was the extent to which AACSB took on board these “Asian problems” and has actually refined, changed, and radically changed their own processes to fit Asian schools. We would like to think that some of the arguments we presented (eventually persuasively) helped pave the way for the accreditations of later Asian schools. In any event we eventually passed through all the hoops and were successfully accredited by AACSB and by EQUIS, as we believe more and more quality Asian programmes will be.

2012-2022: Asia’s Business School of Choice

As we now look towards the start of our 4th decade, and consequently about the 4th decade of English-language MBAs in Thailand, we face a very different MBA future. We are already seeing the impact of digital technologies on learning. It has been said that the essence of education in universities is essentially unchanged over several hundred years. If a time- traveller from the 17th century were to arrive in downtown Bangkok, she would be totally bemused by the shopping malls, traffic, and digital billboards. But if she found her way into a university classroom, she would be instantly at home! All this is about to change.

Already the looming shadow of MOOCs is falling across conventional MBA programmes. At the moment this is more of a clear and present danger in the US itself than in Thailand. But MOOCs are clearly a harbinger of things to come. MBA programmes must adapt and harness new technologies, and those technologies themselves are very likely to originate in Asia, creating more impetus to “Asianize” the MBA.

Sasin is experimenting with blended learning: moving the more routine information delivery parts of courses into on-line, bite-sized, video presentations with associated self-assessment quizzes. This then frees up class time to be 100% group discussion and group reporting, moderated by a faculty member.

We are fortunate in having a variety of spaces within the Sasin facilities which allow us to experiment with “inverting the classroom”. We will trial some blended courses in a flat teaching space; grouping students around circular tables, each with its own flat screen display. The instructor will move from table to table, giving advice, responding to questions and stimulating ideas. When groups report back, the presenting group will take control of all the flat screens and present to their peers. The aim will be to move from the famous “sage on the stage” presenter/audience model to the more interactive model of a digital community, sharing and sourcing together.

At the same time, we are planning to experiment with very large screen displays coupled to video conferencing, to allow executives, business leaders and specialists to speak directly with our students without leaving their home offices, wherever they are in the world. We believe this will be key to bringing a global experience into the classroom in Thailand.

Our new facility, Sasabhum International Learning Center (SILC), near Phuket, will house the latest in technology, and will be the home-base of our new Global Executive MBA. This will be offered at a range of locations, with partners both Asian and non-Asian. The programme is still under final development.

We see all these technological developments as logical extensions of the visiting professor model pioneered by Director Toemsakdi Krishnamra and his team 32 years

ago. Technology now allows resource people to be brought into the classroom—whether that be a virtual or a physical location—with minimal effort on the part of the resources. Faculty can ‘visit’ without the delay and inconvenience of physical travel. Every school can access global resources.

At this point, we believe we can expect to see an enormous range and variety of MBA programmes. The US-centric model, already decrepit, will wither away. At the core of future MBA programmes, we are sure we will still see the classic foundations which the US-centric programmes have developed so well. But programmes will differentiate themselves by the embellishments they add, and the specialties they offer.

As programmes diverge in focus and content, and as material migrates on-line, we can expect to see much mixing-and-matching by students. Why not take an entrepreneurship course here? A Luxury Goods Marketing course there? The degree will be unbundled into a series of separate courses.

Very likely the concept of “just-in-case” education epitomized by the MBA, will be supplanted by the “just-in-time” education featured by short executive education seminars. In a world of unbundled education, courses will be purchased one by one, not by degree; and woe betide the school that gets its pricing or its quality wrong!

But while there are these significant challenges for MBA programmes around the world and in Thailand, there is also great potential for institutions in the Kingdom and in Asia, to tap into the growing demand for business education in the region and to take a leading role in developing and offering a truly Asian 21st century MBA—delivered by a blend of traditional face-to-face interaction and the best of 21st century technology.

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