

pared or positioned for the next recession and its consequences, with the inevitable cutbacks in staff and budgets and the rapid increases in tuition fees at public institutions that typically occur during recessions as states reduce on their funding of institutions.

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**distance learning is where the tension between nonprofit and for-profit higher education is most intense**

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#### 9. *Creating a Sustainable Society and Future*

Interest in creating more sustainable communities has grown in the United States just as it has in many countries. It seems likely that American higher education institutions will be asked to provide greater leadership in quality-of-

life, natural resource, and environmental issues through the research that is conducted on campus and in the way that institutions operate. A difficult problem remains the disposal of hazardous materials, which has been a bone of contention on many campuses. A number of institutions are seeking to address these and other difficult environmental issues through the formation of consortia.

#### 10. *Rethinking Public Higher Education Systems*

Large systems of public higher education are the most typical higher education governance structure in most countries. While they represent a smaller share of all enrollments in the United States, large public systems face obvious challenges as institutional officials and public policymakers wrangle over how to encourage efficiency, productivity, and accountability while keeping costs reasonable. At the City University of New York, the third-largest system in the United States, for example, these challenges have resulted in a major debate over admissions standards and the role of remediation. ■

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## Economic Crisis and Privatization in Thai Universities

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During the economic crisis of the past two years, privatization has become a major concern for Thailand's public universities. Under the new education reform law and the provisions of a \$1 billion loan for social restructuring from the Asian Development Bank, the Thai government wants all 23 state universities to break away from bureaucratic control by the year 2002. At latest report, 7 state-run universities have become independent entities, mostly within the last year. The rest are at various stages in working on their own draft bills for autonomy.

#### *Controversy at Chulalongkorn*

In late September, Thienchai Keeranant, an early proponent of the movement and rector of prestigious Chulalongkorn University, threatened to withdraw the draft autonomy bill already presented to the government. He cited as the reason faculty fears over future government support once the university was no longer a part of the state bureaucracy. The rector of Kasetsart University, Theera Sutabutra, spoke in the same vein—announcing his institution's readiness to leave the state bureaucratic system as soon as government assurances for future benefits and subsidies were in place.

Reasons cited for this erosion of trust were unclear signals from the Ministry of University Affairs, staff shortages created by restrictive government policies, and a renegeing on help promised in the past year. Calling for concrete government measures, a group of Chulalongkorn lecturers in economics and political science argued that pushing state universities out of the bureaucracy would have adverse effects on the country's human resources development. The small, new universities in the provinces with limited ability to earn income from assets, research work, and public donations would be the most vulnerable. Quality lecturers would move to private universities that offered higher salaries. Without a larger government fund for education loans to ease the burden of higher tuition fees, tertiary education would inevitably become unavailable to needy students.

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In response to all the criticism, Abhisit Vejjajiva, a minister in the prime minister's office, pointed to the government's burden in providing free education for all students in the first 12 years of basic education by the year 2002. Only after this project was fully implemented could

the government divert the fund for education loans to university students. Meanwhile, it was each university's responsibility to fix tuition fees that would not be out of reach. By the end of October, however, Mr. Abhisit was assuring state universities of adequate operational budgets, no cuts in subsidies, and a 50 percent increase for salaries of university personnel.

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In fact, the project for free basic education is crucial. According to a United Nations development report, only 44.7 percent of school-age Thais entered secondary school in 1999, compared with 54.2 percent in Burma, 55.9 percent in Mongolia, and 59.2 percent in Zimbabwe. In 1998, the number of young Thais enrolling in schools fell sharply below 1997 levels. The economic crisis has created over a million jobless in the past two years, and their children have often had to leave school to help their cash-strapped families.

Chulalongkorn did not withdraw its draft bill and on November 16 the cabinet approved granting the university autonomy. Even so, opponents on campus did not let up. They called on administrators to hear their objections and review the plan. Political science professor Ji Ungphakorn's response was to say, "I don't see any good in it. Privatization will leave the university under market forces, sparking money-worship and treating education as a mere commodity."

#### *Questions and Fears*

One positive result of the movement toward autonomy has been the increasing desire of lecturers to learn more about teamwork and quality assurance. Workshops that focus on teaching and learning are helping the process along. Inviting lecturers to participate in preparing a university's draft bill also helps. Ramkhamhaeng University, for example, has asked all its lecturers to describe the requirements for assistant professors and actual performance to date.

Yet there is also a generalized sense of insecurity and mistrust of what university authorities will do when freed from central control. These fears include the loss of civil service benefits like tenure until the age of 60, automatic promotions, and royal decorations. The types of evaluations to be used are a major concern. Under the new system, each person must make his or her value evident to the

university. Lecturers, unsure that the new system will be fair enough, naturally feel the need for reassurances because many issues remain unclear.

Administrators like Dr. Amporn A. Srisermbhok of Srinakharinwirot University and Dr. Rapin Tongra-ar of Ramkhamhaeng University have assured their staff that they will have no problems under the new system as long as they conscientiously fulfill their duties. Dr. Amporn, for one, believes that staff will readily accept changes if the government, the Ministry of University Affairs, and the university's central administration present them with a clear vision and unambiguous policies. Top management must be seen as qualified, trustworthy, and supportive.

Clearly, university autonomy remains a controversial issue. In an effort to reduce public expenditures, increase efficiency, and improve services, the program to privatize state enterprises has been under way in Thailand for years. Generally speaking, the move was more acceptable before it was linked to conditions of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, or the Asian Development Bank. Some charge that acceding to these conditions will lead to a national sellout. Others argue that pressure from these international funding agencies gives the universities an excellent opportunity to accomplish what they could not do earlier. At the very least, they now have a convenient scapegoat if things go wrong.

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#### *Likely Outcomes*

Ready or not, change will come. On schedule or not, public universities will gain greater autonomy. Administrators expect the entire process to take at least 10 years. University personnel are more informed and more alert to needed changes now than two years ago. Greater openness of central administration to the voices of doubt and opposition will promote the changes required in organization and infrastructure. University rectors strong in management skills will be crucial to a successful transition.

Observers express optimism that the system of quality assurance growing out of the move to autonomy will improve the general state of affairs. There will be less absenteeism, and people will work harder. Student numbers will not go down, and the changes being instituted in public universities will not exclude the poor from higher education. The move to autonomy in Thailand's public universities reflects global experience. ■