Chapter 10
Quality and Autonomous Universities: Policy Promises and the Paradox of Leadership

Rattana Lao

Abstract This chapter addresses one of the most contested and celebrated reforms in Thai higher education: the transformation of public universities to become autonomous, which means that the state lessens its role in terms of finance, human resources and administrative management to allow each higher institution greater flexibility and freedom. While its advocates have celebrated this reform as the only alternative for Thai higher education, this chapter analyzes the complexity of translating these policy promises into practical realities. Particularly, it focuses on the paradoxical role of university leadership to make decisions regarding administrative and financial arrangements as well as setting policy directions. The chapter critiques the overt obsession with international rankings and quality assessment as detrimental factors which adversely affect the long-term quality of institutions and lead to dissatisfaction within the academic profession.

10.1 Introduction

The idea of transforming Thai universities to be "autonomous" is considered to be one of the most celebrated and contested policies in the history of Thai higher education (Rattana 2015). On the one hand, the Thai state, the Ministry of University Affairs which later became the Office of Higher Education Commission, joined hands with academic leaders to call for the need for greater autonomy. Given that most established universities in Thailand were founded by the Thai state and their development has been influenced by bureaucratic norms and regulations, being autonomous means that these institutions will have greater flexibility and independence in terms of their administrative systems, financial management, and human resource management and development. The autonomous university policy, therefore, has been considered by its advocates as a kind of panacea to address all

Rattana L. (✉)
Kenan Institute Asia, Queen Sirikit National Convention Center, 2nd Floor,
Bangkok 10110, Thailand
e-mail: amp.lao@gmail.com

Table 10.1 Autonomous
universities in Thailand
(1990–2015)

Year	Autonomous universities
1990	Suranaree University of Technology
1992	Walailuck University
1997	Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University
	Mahamongkut Rajavidyala University
1998	Mae Fah Luang University
	King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi
2007	Mahidol University
	King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok
2008	Burapha University
	Thaksin University
	Chulalongkorn University
	Chiang Mai University
	King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang
2010	University of Phayao
2012	Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music
2015	Kasetsart University
	Khon Kaen University
	Suan Dusit University
	Thammasat University

Source: http://www.mua.go.th/university.html

ills in Thai higher education. On the other hand, the policy continues to be criticized by many academics, students, and the general media. The main arguments against autonomous universities include overt commercialization, concerns about equitable educational services, and questions about how it may influence academic freedom.

Making universities autonomous as a policy has been a subject of contested debate for more than five decades in Thailand. The last 20 years has witnessed a proliferation of autonomous universities here. There are two types of autonomous universities. First, there are three universities which were initially established as autonomous from the very beginning, namely, Suranaree University of Technology, Mae Fah Luang University, and Walailuck University. Second, there are those public universities which transferred from state control to the autonomous status. It has indeed now become the reality of Thai higher education, a powerful force that cannot be stopped.

As of 2017, there are at least 23 institutions that have become autonomous, while Silapakorn, Srinakarintarawirot, Prince of Songkla, and Suan Sunandha Rajabhat universities are in the legal process of obtaining autonomy. Table 10.1 provides a list of current autonomous universities in Thailand:

It is important to note that being "autonomous" is not a sufficient condition to ensure quality education. The university autonomy legal acts *promise* "efficiency," "effectiveness," and "flexibility" in contrast with supposedly draconian centralized

state control. There is almost an unwritten assumption that the transformation will automatically yield positive outcomes. Practically, political, economic, and cultural factors continue to impede the possibilities for progress. Since autonomous universities give greater administrative and decision-making power to rectors and administrators, the direction of the universities depends largely on a few powerful individuals. The interviews I have done suggest that this has led to the abuse of administrative power and the creation of a patronage system and centralization of control within these autonomous universities. Economically, uneven resources available to each university create different levels of constraints for institutional development. Meanwhile, the obsession over international rankings has casted doubts on the meaning of what constitutes quality education. Policy papers, interviews, and official records are reviewed to illustrate what being autonomous has *promised* to be and juxtapose that with potential paradoxes in delivering quality higher education for all.

10.2 The Promises of Being Autonomous

This section focuses on the conceptual rationales for what autonomous universities were expected to achieve. To understand why policy elites and university administrators advocate for the autonomous university policy, it is important to map out the landscape of Thai higher education and how closely linked to state control and regulation it has been for decades.

Historically speaking, the Thai university was created by the state for its own purposes. Chulalongkorn, the very first university, was founded in 1917 with the intention to prepare educated elites to staff a modernizing bureaucracy. Meanwhile, Thammasat University was later created in 1934 in order to train individuals to become responsible and active citizens in the post-absolutist and new democratic era. Other universities were created with direct links to ministerial needs and human resource planning. For example, Mahidol University was associated with the Ministry of Public Health, and Kasetsart University was linked to the Ministry of Agriculture. Therefore, the management and structure of universities resemble that of a formal bureaucracy. Each university receives their operating budget from the Budget Bureau and therefore needs to follow strict regulations and requirements similar to other ministries or departments. Atagi (1998, p. 10) describes the rigidity of the budgetary process. Each year, the university has to estimate their expected annual expenditures and submit their annual budget to the Office of Higher Education Commission (formerly the Ministry of University Affairs). Subsequently, OHEC will propose the budget to the Budget Bureau, which is responsible for the national budget of all state departments and ministries. The final stage is to submit the annual budget to the Cabinet. While the remaining budget not used for any year must be returned to the Budget Bureau, each budget has been itemized with specific details and cannot be used in unassigned areas. In this scenario, universities do not have the flexibility or freedom to manage their income in order to improve the university and its efficiency.

At the same time, university lecturers traditionally were considered to be part of the civil service system. Therefore, the salary scale for university lecturers are set by the Office of Civil Service Commission, similarly to other official bureaucrats. These bureaucratic bottlenecks such as itemized budgets, procurement regulations, and limitations in salary policy were perceived as major challenges to the development of modern universities. In addition to these bureaucratic structures, the state has also inserted its political interference in other areas. Politicians and political leaders have intervened in university management by becoming rectors or politically meddling with the personnel appointments in the universities. Altogether, the proponents of the autonomous university policy argued these factors seriously impede and constrain the development of Thai higher education as indicated in the following quotation:

> We believed that the bureaucratic system limited the flexibility and freedom of the universities. There was a lot of political insertion and therefore the universities could not follow its mission and vision. Then another problem is the low salary because the salary scale is linked with the civil service scale. It was very hard to find quality individuals to become academics because the incentive was less appealing than that of the private sector. When the universities face with these obstacles, they could not freely manage themselves and become excellent. (Interview with Former Secretary General of OHEC, 11th of August, 2010)

It must be highlighted that the push for greater university autonomy can be considered as resulting from a strong policy coalition among leading bureaucrats in the OHEC/Ministry of Education as well as executive members of public universities. Professor Charas Suwanwela, former rector of Chulalongkorn University and a prominent thinker in the Thai higher education sector, has been advocating for greater institutional autonomy. Under strict state control and regulation, it is difficult for universities to excel. Accordingly he argues:

> Especially under the slow and ineffective bureaucratic system, it is necessary to find a more appropriate system of administration for universities…Although each university has its own governing act, but the entire structure is still dominated by centralized management. All universities are still under the very same regulations. These include all the academic requirements, human resources and financial management, which are set by the Ministry of the University Affairs/Office of Higher Education Commission. Every university and every department has to follow the same thing. It is unbalance. Some say it is too strict, some say it is too lenient. It is ineffective and inefficient management (Charas 2008, pp. 28–29)

The interview above illustrates the frustration of the state-directive and centralized system. Given the status quo, it is undeniable that the prescription to reform Thai university system is to lessen state control in higher education and delegate greater institutional autonomy to the universities. Against such a bureaucratic system and structure, the concept of autonomous university has been proposed as a liberating way out. The new system is expected to "unlock" the hurdles and bottlenecks of the bureaucracy. According to Krissanapong Kirtikara (2004), the former president of King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi and one of the major advocates of the autonomous university policy, the features include:

> University autonomy means that the state allows autonomous universities to manage their own three major internal affairs, namely, academic matters (academic programs, university structures), personnel matters (personnel system, recruitment, remuneration, benefits), and finance and budgets (budget management, procurement system). The state can direct, supervise, audit and evaluate autonomous universities (p. 38)

Becoming autonomous does not mean that the state does not provide financial support to universities. That is a common misunderstanding. Rather, there are changes in the way the budget is allocated and monitored. To overcome the budgetary bottlenecks and rigidities, autonomous university policy means that block grants rather than line-item budgets are the norm. The nature of a block grant is quite different from the line-item budget. In this new budgeting process, the state provides the total expenditures for the universities without directing where or how the funds are to be spent. Therefore, the university will have greater autonomy to manage their own resources to meet their own special needs. They can allocate the budgets according to the university's own policies and priorities. In a recent interview with a long-standing advocate of autonomy and academic administrator, the concept of block grants is carefully explained:

> When we proposed the budget to the Budget Bureau, we still have to itemize the expenditures. Say, how many chairs and tables we need this year. However, when the budget is allocated to us, it is allocated in a lump sum or in the block grant. They give us the total amount that we can spend each year. Then, we can decide how to spend it. If we don't need the chairs, of course we can use it for other items. This gives room for us to decide what is most needed for the university. (Interview of former President of KMUTT, 22nd December, 2014)

Since the autonomous policy concept was introduced long ago in 1964 and later reiterated in 1990 under the First Long Range Plan of Higher Education, Thailand has witnessed the creation of new types of universities under the autonomous principle as noted earlier.

10.3   The Paradox of Leadership

The previous section has shown that there is a policy consensus among leading policy elites in Thailand. The debate has been framed in such a way that the bureaucracy and its structure are viewed as inherent problems. Conceptually, being legally autonomous promises greater efficiency and effectiveness in the financing of the university, curriculum design, and overall management. However, changing the legal status of the university from a state-own public university to become autonomous does not directly or necessarily translate to becoming a better performing or a better quality higher education institution. After many decades of public universities being subject to rigid bureaucratic regulations and centralized decision-making, there remains the legacy of bureaucratic norms that are hard to overcome expeditiously. This is why decades ago international scholars such as Siffin (1966) and Riggs (1966) called Thailand a bureaucratic polity. Individuals living and working in the public universities have been accustomed to the directive regulations and mentality, so much so that it takes different factors, including leadership, continuation, and strategic planning to facilitate successful transition to a quite different new kind of system.

While legal transformation might unlock various regulations and rules, how each institution uses this new legal "flexibility" to achieve its purposes requires more innovative ways to govern, direct, and implement change. Three factors are discussed below to illustrate the challenges facing the promise of creating quality autonomous universities. First, the quality of the leadership and its vision play a monumental role in determining the direction of universities. On the contrary, there is a potential pitfall related to the greater empowerment of university executives. Issues such as a patronage system, abuse of power, and corruption are pertinent challenges to quality, accountability, and transparency of autonomous universities. Second, there is the issue of uneven resources among institutions (see Chap. 9, Table 9.4). While far-sighted leadership teams will be able to address the issue of uneven institutional resources in a way that benefits academic quality, most universities choose the easier option of expanding more courses resulting in the commercialization of higher education. Third, it is undeniable that all institutions are driven toward improving their institutional ranking as indicators of success. A narrow-minded objective of higher education reform can jeopardize the overall quality and well-being of the institutions and their members such as students and academics.

Professor Charas Suwanwela (2008) argues: "For an autonomous university to work successfully, it needs leadership" (p. 264). Interviews with university administrators revealed consensus that institutions with strong and dedicated teams of leaders, who cement a foundation, direction, and vision for the university promise to perform better than those without such dynamic leadership. Under the Autonomous University Act, university councils have greater autonomy and authority – they will become the most powerful governing body of the higher education institutions. The rector will hold the highest executive power within each institution based on its own governing act. The roles of the university council are expected to be paramount in key institutional matters such as the issues of financial management, curriculum design, and human resource development. Instead of asking the Office of Higher Education Commission's permission and approval, the university council will oversee the internal management and direction of the university. They need to define the formulation of strategy, policymaking, supervision, and accountability. Based on interviews with key actors at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), the first public university which was transformed to become autonomous, the issue of quality leadership has been singled out as one of the most important aspects of their institutional experience.

There is enormous reliance on the role of university council and rectors to ensure the quality of the institutions – however, there are few mechanisms in place to ensure the accountability and quality of such bodies. Dr. Kamjorn Kittiyakavee, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, stated in a broadcast interview:

> The most worrying aspect of autonomous university is that the university council is the most powerful governing body of that university. *If the university council has the accountability in term of management, then the university has a hope*. However, if there is problem of governance, it will create a *deadlock*. The council is the highest institution without checks and balances (Broadcast interview, 22 March, 2015).

The italicized words demonstrate the changing role of the Thai state and its repositioning itself in university affairs. It implies not only the retreat in terms of responsibility but also the elusive hope for the possibility of good governance that it is now up to the university itself to ensure quality leadership. The legal autonomy, which empowers university councils and rectors to manage, rests on the assumption of decentralization of power, increased institutional participation, and institutional empowerment. There is a strong expectation that the university council is committed to provide institutional vision, policy direction, and overall quality management. The process of selecting members of the university council is questionable regarding its accountability and quality. University rectors and administrators are those who select members of university councils, while the university council has to endorse and approve the selection of the rectors. Some view the close-linked relationship between the university council and the rectors as an essential factor for cohesive teamwork. It also creates a vicious circle of patron-client relationship instead of providing a system of genuine checks and balances. Over the years, there have been cases questioning the transparency and accountability of the process. For example, powerful individuals try to make changes in the rectorship selection process to ensure their appointment or university councils take side with the rector over the conflicts within the university *(Thai Rath* 2015). In some cases, university councils have been overly lenient in dealing with corruption in use of public funds. The recent scandal of King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang fraud is a case in point (*Daily News* 2015). Despite high expectation, the current role of university councils is limited to be a stamp of approval rather than being an active provider of vision and leadership, which can provide important checks and balances.

The importance of leadership in autonomous universities has to be closely examined and understood in relationship to the issue of resources: how to earn institutional income as well as how to utilize budgets and funds. Each university (with or without becoming autonomous) is endowed with unequal resources, economically, and academically. There is a huge disparity in the annual budgets from the Budget Bureau. Each university has different sources of income. It includes donations, tuition fees, university services, returns on investments, or fees from their possessions or special assets. For example, Chulalongkorn has special advantages through its extensive royal land assets. Mahidol University has several hospitals under its operation. The table below illustrates the budget and income disparity among selected autonomous universities. Four of the five universities listed are generating more than 50% of their income by themselves (Table 10.2).

Table 10.2 Annual budget of selected autonomous universities (Million Baht)

	Chulalongkorn	Chiang Mai	KMUTT	Mahidol	Suranaree
Budget bureau	5443	5638	1361	13,240	1849
Additional income	5743	8044	1880	35,071	320
Total	11,736	13,683	3241	48,312	2170

Source: Budget Bureau (2014).

Although the state continues to be the major provider of many university's annual budgets, the Budget Bureau will negotiate with each university for greater cost sharing. According to a budget analyst at the Ministry of Education:

> The executives will have to set their own expenditures, while they will also have to be more responsible in terms of income generating. There will be more cost sharing between the state and the university. The Budget Bureau will no longer be responsible for 100% of all university expenditures. (Interview, Budget Analyst at the Ministry of Education, 18th of December, 2014)

Under the new financial arrangements, each autonomous university has to be more responsible for their own income. The most common strategy to increase income is to increase tuition fees. Protests have occurred across campuses prior and after the transformation of universities concerning the potential hikes of tuition fees. Based on an official report of Chulalongkorn University, the tuition fee for science-related faculties was around 16,000 Baht in 2005 and it is now around 21,000 baht per semester. As for social science faculties, it is reported that the tuition fee was around 12,000 baht a semester in 2005 and it is now 17,000 baht a semester (Chulalongkorn University 2016). Similarly, there is an increase in tuition fees at Burapha University. Prior to becoming autonomous, the tuition fee for social science subjects was around 7000 baht per semester. It is now approximately 14,000 baht a semester (Thaipublica 2012). A longitudinal analysis of students' tuition fees across all autonomous universities is necessary. It will provide useful information for the public and for the state to curtail tuition fees in order to ensure equitable access to higher education in autonomous universities. As things currently stand, students' voices and concerns are not only not the priority but ignored.

The need for increasing income has led many universities also to push faculties to create and open more short courses, international programs, and graduate studies. Thailand now has around 1000 international programs (see Chap. 11). The commercialization of many universities comes at the expense of the overall quality and equity of education (see Bok 2004; Powers and St. John 2017). The academics are burned out from teaching intensively in the evenings and on weekends and have neither incentives nor energy to pursue research and publications. Similar sentiment is resonated by many academics throughout the research community. One academic succinctly encapsulated this phenomenon: "The university wants us to open international programs, even if we told them we are not ready. They say the faculty needs money, the university needs money"(Interview, academic from Thammasat University, 10th December, 2014). Consequently, the autonomous university policy has resulted in the intensification of the commercialization of higher education. Another interview with a policy analyst at the Ministry of Education also expressed concerns about how autonomous university policy has fostered the commercialization of higher education:

> But there is a problem of too much autonomy. Some universities are focusing too much for profit maximization at the expense of academic quality. There still needs to be some kind of control and regulations so that universities do not take advantage of these legal loopholes to open new courses and programs that lack quality but just for profits. Many universities keep opening new programs without having been granted the permission or the curriculum has not been approved. Students suffer from this. There needs to be a better checks and balances. (Interview with Budget Analyst at the Ministry of Education, 18th of December, 2014)

The interview above captures the close link between university autonomy and the commercialization of higher education (Bok 2004; Powers and St. John 2017; Stein 2004). Under the new financial management that pushes universities to be more financially independent, they need to find ways to generate extra income. Many universities have taken an easy road by opening new courses and programs. Opening more courses is not the only way universities have used to earn more income. In fact, it is not a sustainable solution. In an interview with a former university rector, it was revealed that the quality and vision of its leader have led to institutional success in restructuring its income and lessening its dependence on the state budget.

> It is evident that we have managed to restructure our university income. Traditionally, if the state gives us two baht, we can only earn one baht ourselves. Within eight to ten years, we have managed to receive only one baht from the state and earn two baht by ourselves. We are the only university that can achieve this without a hospital or school. We can do it because we have many projects and we have capacity. (Interview with the former Rector at KMUTT, 5th of January, 2010)

Given that KMUTT does not own hospitals or schools to generate its own income, the executive team had decided early on, even before becoming autonomous, that they will focus on research. KMUTT has encouraged its faculty members to do more research both academic research as well as applied research with the private sector through the creation of a Research, Innovation, and Partnerships Office. The Office acts as the mediator and secretariat for university researchers and potential investors. The main responsibilities include finding and matching researchers and funding agencies as well as providing administrative support. In return, the Office will charge 15% of the total research budget, which becomes the university's discretionary income (Interview with the former President of KMUTT, 22nd December, 2014). Instead of focusing on creating more courses and programs, KMUTT has decided to take the path of the applied research road as a way to gain greater financial independence. The table below illustrates the increasing share of income generated through research and other academic services (Table 10.3).

Evidently, KMUTT's income from research and academic services has gradually increased over the years in proportion to the annual budget received from the government. Since KMUTT's success has depended largely on the quality of its team of executives and policy continuation, the institution has strived to create an institutional structure that will be able to select talented individuals, prepare them for

Table 10.3 Proportional income generation of KMUTT over time

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014 (expected)	2015 (expected)
Government	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Tuition	0.89	0.86	0.77	0.79	0.74	0.78	0.79
Research	0.83	0.69	1.31	1.00	1.06	1.12	1.12

Source: Harit Sutabutr (2014)

leadership positions, and ensure smooth transitions from one rector or team of administrators to the next. Dr. Harit Sutabutr, the architect of KMUTT's transformation, provided detailed guidelines on the selection criteria and succession plan for the administrative team:

> Education system takes a long time to develop and reach its goals. The continuity and collaboration amongst one administrative team to the next therefore is very important. The University Council must find the way to select those with quality to become the rectors, while mitigate the possible contentious and hostile competition in order to ensure collegiality and continuity between different groups (Harit 2014, p. 3).

The case of KMUTT deserves further attention as to why it is possible to instill new norms and structures even though the institution has been under state regulations since its inception. Factors such as leadership, institutional legacy, and policy/academic entrepreneurs are so important that they must be understood in their own context and trajectory. Interviews with various key actors at KMUTT highlight idiosyncratic features of the institution that make it hard, if not impossible, to replicate elsewhere. These include the personal connections between leading executives, similar academic backgrounds of being engineers/scientists, as well as shared policy beliefs in terms of institutional goals and directions. As Varaporn et al. (1996) argue, in the case of Thailand "loyalty to individuals often takes precedence over loyalty to a particular organization" (p. 62). The danger of strong but autocratic leadership in higher education institutions also deserves more attention in its own right and how such administrative character is damaging to foster participatory and distributive decision-making in academic settings.

The Thai state has introduced different mechanisms to act as regulators of "quality" in Thai higher education. At the national level, there are at least three organizations involved in quality policies. First is the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) which is responsible for the Thailand Qualification Framework (TQF), Internal Quality Assessment (IQA), and Education Criteria for Performance Excellence (EdPEX). Second is the Office of Educational Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA), which is legally mandated to conduct external quality assessment of all educational institutions once every 5 years in order to follow up and monitor performance. Third is the Office of Public Sector Development Commission (OPDC). The figure below illustrates the current quality regime that is being imposed on Thai higher education institutions (Fig. 10.1).

The rise of quality policies demonstrates Thailand's attempt to move toward a new public management paradigm in regulating its higher education sector through quality indicators. This is especially appealing to those public universities which transformed themselves to become autonomous universities. Rectors, administrators, and university councils use these indicators to indicate their progress and performance. Among all of these quality mechanisms, international rankings are the most influential factor (Downing and Ganotice 2017; Hazelkorn 2017). All of Thailand's leading higher education institutions share in common the aspiration to improve their international rankings. The status of where their institution stands in the international league table has become an equivalent of not only institutional
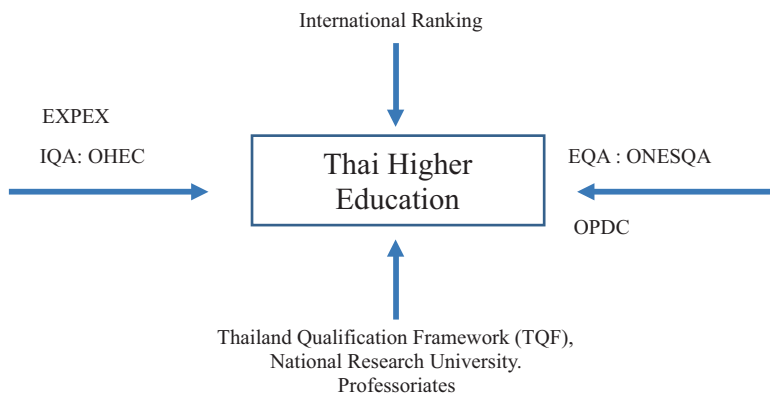
International Ranking

EXPEX

IQA: OHEC

Thai Higher Education

EQA : ONESQA

OPDC

Thailand Qualification Framework (TQF),
National Research University.
Professoriates

Fig. 10.1 Quality landscape in Thai higher education system (*Source*: Rattana 2012)

quality but also an indicator of the executives' performance. This is unlike previous years when constructing more buildings and infrastructure was used to indicate the rector's performance. (Interview with academic from Chulalongkorn University, 9th of December, 2014).

Undoubtedly, administrators feel compelled to improve the international rankings of their institutions. There are both carrots and sticks in the game of research performance. On the one hand, universities have begun to provide direct incentives to encourage their academic staff to publish more research. Depending on the level of journals or publishers where they publish, academics may be given financial rewards for such publications. This is a mechanism to incentivize faculty to be more productive. On the other hand, minimum publication requirements have been built into academic contracts and annual performance reviews, depending on the faculty in question. This latter aspect is fundamentally different from the traditional public university system whereby university academics were considered parts of the civil service system and did not have to comply with any performance reviews. Under the traditional system, after a 6-month probationary period, then virtually all faculty gained lifelong tenure.

This carrots and sticks approach is viewed by university administrators a way forward to improve the quality of universities. At face value, this material financial strategy might seem to address the issue of low salaries for academics, and extra income helps to incentivize them to publish more. One academic from a faculty of economics argued: "there are more incentives to push for research, but the organizational culture has not changed. It is not conducive for research work" (Interview, 10th of January, 2011). This organizational culture includes heavy teaching loads, limited grants and funding for research for junior and mid-level staff, and inadequate research time. Institutions need to think of creative ways to improve the research system more systematically and sustainably than simply offering financial rewards for each publication.

Furthermore, universities and funding agencies often limit the research time within the scope of an academic calendar. This is too short to produce any signifi-

cant research work. Good research takes time to follow up and monitor the results. This applies to both scientific, social science, and humanities research. The current research system in Thailand is attempting to respond to the rankings game, while losing sight of the creativity, quality, and relevance of academic work (see Argyris 1980; Sokal and Bricmont 1999). At the same time, the current research and ranking system has encouraged fiercer competition among academics, which result in academic rivalry rather than the creation of a quality academic community and collaboration.

The shared conviction among the state, rectors, and university councils about these various performance indicators has enormous ramifications for the higher education system in general and the quality of the academic profession in particular. Each university is encouraged to introduce different types of QA systems into their institution. This reflects a new form of management and a new mode of control and surveillance without direct control. Through this system, enormous paperwork, manpower, and resources have to be spent to comply with these quality policies. If the overall objective is to promote "efficiency," "effectiveness," and "higher rankings" with greater research and publications, the introduction of multiple quality policies is counterproductive, usurping too much academic time and energy. Despite years of voicing dissent through media, social media, and public conferences, academic's voices, who question the merit, philosophy, and implication of these quality policies, have been regarded simply as "complainers" and whiners. Quality universities depend on quality and dedicated academics and teachers. It is important that their voices be heard and counted. This is a part of participatory policy process to improve the system and create inclusive institutions. One of the policy promises of becoming autonomous rests on the need to create better incentives for more qualified individuals to become academics, creating a collegial, fair, and inclusive working environment. This is not an option, but an absolute necessity.

10.4   Conclusion

For more than five decades, the autonomous university idea is the single most important higher education policy endorsed by the Thai state and academic administrators. These advocates paint the bureaucracy under state control as ossifying, draconian, and deterrent to development. In contrast, the promise of being autonomous is presented as a panacea – the only exit option available for the future of quality higher education in Thailand.

As 23 universities gradually transformed to become autonomous, it is evident that the legal transformation in and of itself is not sufficient to ensure the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of higher education institutions. Issues such as the transparency and accountability of autonomous universities are worrisome. The tight-knit relationship between members of university councils and rectors, their ambivalent pathway to power, and inertia for checks and balances have casted doubts on the merits of university autonomy. Under autonomous university acts, the

state has liberated these universities from financial rigidity and traditional chain of commands. However, another new form of state apparatus has been formed. In the name of "quality," a myriad of paperwork, performance reviews, and competitions have been instilled to govern the academy – in hope that quality policies will translate into quality education.

This chapter has illustrated that the current fate of autonomous universities in Thailand is caught between two opposing forces. On the one hand, there is greater pressure for institutions to generate more of their own income in order to be financially independent. This has led to the commercialization of higher education whereby new courses, programs, and universities are mushrooming. Higher tuition fees for students are also resulting. On the other hand, leading universities in Thailand are driven to gain greater institutional recognition at the global and regional levels. All executives express their common, if not narrow-minded, interest to improve international rankings. The current "rankings game" is not necessarily conducive for educational quality and academic freedom. It is short-sighted in terms of its rewards and inadequate in terms of its resources such as research grants and funding to promote long-term quality and sustainable valuable research.

Methodologically, this chapter has focused on the challenges of ensuring the quality of autonomous universities at the macro level. More research is needed, especially detailed in-depth case studies to provide insights into this complex and important issue in Thailand's higher education sector. Each university is diverse in terms of its origins, endowed with unequal resources, and structured by different cultures and norms. Policymakers should consider carefully what is the next step for Thai higher education. Since the autonomous university idea has been the most important higher education policy proposal for many years and slowly it has been realized, it is important to think ahead of ways in which to promote quality and excellence through participatory and progressive higher education that endorses quality learning, encourages rigorous and relevant scholarship, and fosters a collegial collaborative academic community.

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