

The creative university in the Thai creative economy

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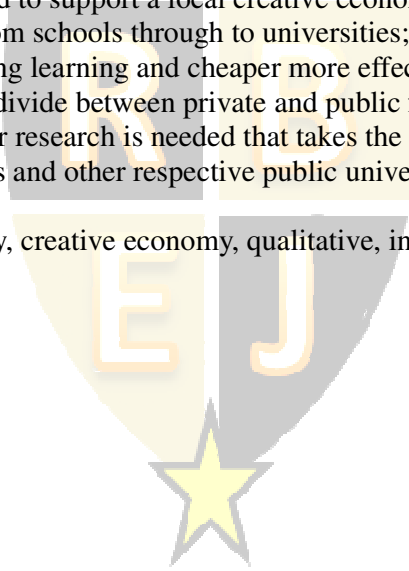
Abstract

This paper examines the managerial issues affecting the role that the creative university will need to play in the Thai creative economy underpinning the need to enable lifelong learning in Thailand.

This research empirical paper utilises an interpretive approach to understand the perceptions of university management experiences in small sample of Thai private universities using a small semi-structured questionnaire. The present study draws data from a small set of qualitative in-depth interviews administered to university managers from a defined target population of twenty seven (27), with twelve (12) interviews being carried out.

The outcomes indicate that Thailand needs to build a more inclusive innovation educational system customised to support a local creative economy; introduce a creative/innovative culture from schools through to universities; provide more effective government support for lifelong learning and cheaper more effective educational provision that is open to all; reduce the divide between private and public funded universities through research collaboration. Further research is needed that takes the target population into the wider Thai private universities and other respective public universities.

Keywords: creative university, creative economy, qualitative, innovation.



1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the role that the creative university will need to play in the Thai creative economy. In essence, underpinning the need for enabling lifelong learning (based on European Council, 2010) for Thai citizens utilising ICT can offer is an important way of fostering each individual's competitiveness and employability, social inclusion and consequent personal development. In this way, education, and more specifically higher education will almost certainly play a much more important role than in the past in the creative economy. However, not all universities are the same, and as such, the future tendency will be for Thai citizens to engage more effectively with perceived creative universities.

Many universities are starting to launch new drives to illustrate to their stakeholders that they are changing the fundamental way in which they operate. Consequently, the newest trend in higher education is this response – management moving universities towards being creative universities. This is something of an oxymoron – as universities are by definition all about being creative (Armstrong, 2010) – just look at all the research that is being operationalised in any given university today – universities were always being creative – it is just that now there is a political, social and economic focus that has turned in their direction.

1.1. Creative Industries

The term Creative Industries (Cutler and Buckeridge, 1994) was first mooted in 1994, and has grown in significance since. An accepted definition of a creative industry is: “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” - which included 13 different sectors. Consequently, creative industries have potential and considerable influence in the effectiveness of the Thai creative economy as a whole as the creative economy compels creativity to become not only the priority strategy but also the dominant one. UNCTAD (2008) further suggested that the links between general business and the creative industries are blurring as creative output becomes the norm.

Creative industries are often characterised by small to medium enterprises with a flat structure (Hesmondhalgh, 2007); close-knit networks (Hartley, 2005) strengthened by technology developments; and creativity (Miles and Green, 2008) and innovation (McRobbie, 2005) being a central focus of their business activities utilising local knowledge transfer and underpinned by Florida's (2002) creative class.

1.2. Major Drivers Connecting Creative Industries and Creative Universities

An accepted major driver for the Creative Economy (CE) is the central notion of the development and retainment of people through learning and skills (Fleming, 2007) that will reinforce the creative industries and provide the central creative essence through university engagement (Drucker and Goldstein, 2007). An extension of this suggests that creative economies encompass creative industries – but this is a little limiting, as there does not seem to be any input or consideration from other actors such as down-upstream developers/providers; consumers; or higher education. However, few empirical papers have focused any research output in this critical arena. This is considered unfortunate as without education, the main actors of the creative economy are left out and consequently, there is no creative economy.

In essence creative economy researchers do not consider the university as within the creative sector as most industry reports use the 'Three-sector-model' (Söndermann, 2007) and place universities within the public sector. Creative industries consequently, often comprise a totally separate undertaking with little or no direct connection to universities. However, there is now growing recognition that universities have a decisive role in bridging the connection between the creative industries and the required learning and skills development (Keane, 2004). In many ways this is an opportunity to diversify the university provision, whilst connecting theory and practice, which are pillars that support long-term creativity (Boden, 2004) leading to mass-innovation (Yi, 2000) and on-going creative ecology (Roodhouse and Mokre, 2004).

1.3. The Role of the Creative University in Creating a Creative Workforce

How the Creative University (CU) could help creative industries and what is necessary to meet creative industry requirements? It has been defined as what creativity is not (Seltzer and Bentley, 1999) - 'The most important misconception about creativity is that it involves artistic sensibility' and is thus related to any human endeavour that introduces new views and learning about manifest events within a university.

Should the focus be on younger people or on as many individuals as possible? If, as expected, that life-long learning should become a priority, then the focus for universities should move away from younger people at university to embrace all members of the Thai population.

Further, government funding for special projects should also be available to both public and private universities. According to Thailand's country report, in the 2006 academic year, the number of graduates was 337,369. Of this figure, 285,941 [84.75%] completed their study from public universities and 51,428 [15.25%] from private universities (Bangkok Post, 2009).

Creativity can be defined (Amabile, 1996) as a set of skills and attitudes needed in generating ideas and products. Higher education can provide for these essential skill and knowledge building (Howard-Jones, 2008) and as a provider of mass education can do it both cheaply and provide coverage that crosses cultural, geographical as well as technological divides through the appropriate use of technology and personal learning contracts (Coles, 1991). This also predisposes that management of universities are equally innovative in the development of academic provision and recognises the important steps that HE must take in order to assure this process. These steps include changing the curriculum and its delivery (Jackson and Shaw, 2005) to ensure creativity in the classroom; optimising course assessments that help develop creativity patterns – which may require major changes to the assessment and examination processes currently considered by many researchers as restrictive (Runco, 2003; and Kaufman and Sternberg, 2007).

The above issues consequently raise the following questions:

- What is the role of a creative university in the creative economy?
- How does a university become a creative university?; and,
- What influences a CU to make fundamental changes to its management and operations to move towards a CU?

These questions are posited in an attempt to illuminate the issues surrounding university role and influences on those roles.

2. METHODOLOGY

To consider more implicitly the issues and questions raised, this research empirical paper utilised an interpretive approach to understand the perceptions of university management experiences in Thai private universities (Walsh, White, and Young, 2008) using a small semi-structured questionnaire creating an a purposeful element of context and flexibility (Cassell & Symon, 2004). Given the lack of purposeful research in this area, this methodology is seen as appropriate for generating contextual data underpinning the creation of richer theory development (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2007).

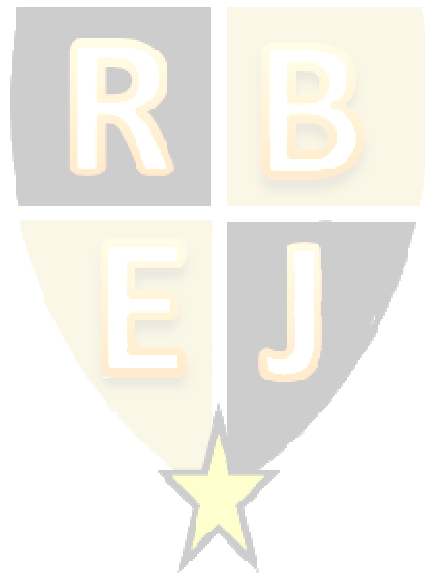
The population for this study was university managers in eighteen (27) private universities in Bangkok (based on Carman, 1990). The criteria of theoretical purpose and relevance (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) were applied to the targeted population. After further using Glaser's (2004) sampling processes, eighteen (18) universities were approached. However, six declined and therefore twelve (12) managers were thus determined as the resultant sample frame which could be considered convenience sampling (after Harrel and Fors, 1992). Interviews were conducted in English and took approximately one hour. All interviews were audio-recorded after gaining explicit permission, and were later transcribed verbatim. The conduct of the interviews follows Gray and Wilcox (1995), with each individual being asked the same set of questions - modified through ancillary questioning (probes and follow-ups) in the same way as Balshem (1991). To increase the reliability of the data, the actual transcription was returned to each respondent for correction, addition or deletion and return, which followed the process of validated referral (Reeves and Harper, 1981). Whole-process validity was achieved as the respondents were considered professionals (Tull & Hawkins, 1990) and knowledgeable of the context and content associated with the research orientation.

Each interview was manually coded initially using Copernic desktop according to sub-themes that 'surfaced' from the interview dialogue using a form of open-coding which is derived from Glaser (1992a) and Straus and Corbin (1990); and also by using a checklist matrix based on (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This treatment was also reinforced and extended through the use of thematic analysis conducted using the NVivo qualitative software package (Walsh et al., 2008). Each interview was treated and coded independently. In this way, no portion of any interview dialogue was left uncoded and the overall outcome represented the shared respondents views and perspectives. Various themes were sensed from the use of this package, as well as from the manual-coding. This triangulistic form of interrogation was an attempt to increase the validity of the choice of both key themes and sub-themes through a triangulation process. NVivo was further used to explore these sub-themes by helping to pull together each of these sub-themes from all the interviews (Harwood and Garry, 2003). In this way, it was possible to capture each respondent's comments on each supported sub-theme and place them together for further consideration and analysis. Categories and properties are abstractions in the sense that they represent elements of not one respondent's story, but rather the stories of more than one respondent. Their relevance to all cases in the study gives them some form of explanatory power regarding their particular and unique perspective.

2.1. Presentation of Framework Outcomes

The research questions were mapped to the generated nine major themes, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix). These eight major themes are further discussed below in section 3.

The outcomes of this research inquiry in terms of the most discussed themes and the total number of references for the main theme and sub-themes are as indicated in Table 2 (Appendix) and modelled as indicated in Figure 1(Appendix).



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The style adopted for reporting and illustrating the data is influenced by Gonzalez, (2008) and also Daniels et al. (2007) and is discussed below, focusing on the raised research questions and the resultant main themes.

3.1. What is the role of a creative university in the creative economy?

Main Themes

Government Policy and Funding (GPF)	University Support (US)	Stakeholders (S)
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3.1.1. Government Policy and Funding (GF)

Of crucial interest was the notion of funding university developments in the creative economy which is as indicated in Table 2 (Appendix) and shows an example that gave rise to the theme - Government Funding.

As one respondent indicated ...”This all costs money. Where’s it going to come from? The government doesn’t plan to help private universities. Something has to change in the priorities of government planning”... This is perhaps an elusive issue, because the literature does not discuss a direct but a more tenuous link between government funding and the level of creativeness a university is considered to hold. However, private universities appear to harness better creative outcomes because they aren’t shackled by government constraints in terms of its specific and particular pedagogic ideology, as a respondent suggested ...”we cannot go along with government demands all the time - its continuously changing and often politically dominated”... and further highlighted by another respondent ...”as perhaps unhelpful, because government funding is one thing, government interference is another, as it reduces our autonomy especially when the government does not provide any help to private universities to fund on-going creative developments”...

3.1.2. University Support (US)

This aspect was commonly seen as not only necessary, but also predisposed to rationally cater to the effectiveness of the creative developments of the university (Ball, 2002). For example, one respondent indicated that ...”we need to be able to help students explore their own learning needs”... This suggests that universities may need to move towards more flexible approaches to university provision through modular programmes, whilst helping to develop more flexible student outcomes linking pedagogic tolerance with purposeful innovative ideas. Further, the need to assess the level of creativity revealed by the programmes of study appears to be an essential requirement ...”as often the bureaucracy gets in the way and we cannot help students quickly enough so they go elsewhere eventually”...

Consequently, moving towards a creative university requires upfront funding and a clear managerial pedagogic strategy visible to all stakeholders. The use of support processes has to be central to the university system and its reputation as it is ...”something that our students expect - to get a better job as a consequence of going to a creative university”... The more responsive the creative university to student needs, the more likely that student numbers will increase as will its reputation, thus ...changing ...”the university system to help students will help the economy grow through knowledge building”...

3.1.3 Stakeholders (S)

It is possibly an interesting acknowledgement that ...”stakeholders are important to appease. Their views have to be taken into consideration”... This indicates that management are aware that it is not only students who need to be considered as it ...”is crucial to satisfy all stakeholders - staff students, parents etc. – if you can”... The notion of putting together a programme that will allow the creative university management to consider all relevant stakeholders may be considerable in terms of expenditure and time. In essence, paradoxically, unless there is government funding (which requires a level playing field) then only the rich private universities will make any sort of progress towards becoming a fully functioning and recognised creative university.

3.2 How does a university become a creative university?

Main Themes

University Leadership (UL)	Entrepreneurial Development (ED)	Process Flexibility (PF)	Educational Networks (EN)
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3.2.1 University Leadership (UL)

It is eluded that university leadership (Tosey, 2006) must do more than just use creativity to converge and control (bureaucratic management) reflecting one respondent who stated that it was necessary to ...”help students through appropriate leadership and knowledge building”... Further, another respondent indicated that ...”university management has to take the lead. We can’t wait for the government to help us”... This aspect is further supported by another respondent who suggested that it is the ...”duty of the university management to look at what the nation needs and provide a workforce that is creative - above all creative”... However, Fullan, cited in (Tosey, 2006) does not agree with this, as embracing creativity leads to a tolerance of failure - not regarded as a useful notion in 21st Century universities in light of the present recessive forces. Leadership that involves vision and careful planning often leads to good strategic leadership and collegiate work patterns throughout the university (Craft, 2006). Thus informed ‘professionalism’ within a context of ‘high challenge, high support’ environment appears to be key to the necessary engagement of leadership potential for university staff and students. As such ...”management have such a crucial role to play in terms of its leadership and pedagogic orientation”... was a common conclusion drawn from respondents.

Respondents also appeared to understand that the creative economy does not rest with young students. It rests with students of all ages and was indicated by one respondent who stated ...”it’s confusing. I know what I would want, but if we have, for example, older students here, well”... ...”they may not fit in. It will require a major change in how the university management deals with them”... This obvious remark goes against life-long learning developments in most Western universities, as older, more experienced people undergo continuous learning engagement in order to provide a more flexible and connected and entrepreneurial workforce (Weaver, 1999) raising the potential for greater societal benefits (Thorsteinsson, 2002). Thus, stakeholders will need to make habitual changes to their mindset if the creative university developments become serious.

Further, universities may need to change their management focus from a bureaucratic engagement targeting numbers to a more flexible, creative engagement focusing on helping people learn - staff and students. This means greater access to the tools of research (in many cases seemingly unrealistic and inadequate in terms of meeting contemporary learning needs) - although this may be considered a significant challenge in fostering innovation and creativity (Vaux, 1999).

3.2.2 Entrepreneurial Development (ED)

Entrepreneurial development was signified by some respondents as meaning ...”we are in an economy that expects everyone to be entrepreneurs - so we as a university have to do just that”... However, in response to growing pressures from industry, one respondent suggested that ...”we need to create more confidence in student entrepreneurial abilities by ensuring they are well educated and trained to enter industry”...

This supports Florida’s (2004) claims that without the pivotal role of the creative university in creating entrepreneurial environments that support the creative economy the notion of universities as engines of innovation are subdued if not even ignored. Consequently, as one respondent indicated that ...”the old ways of fixed curriculum development have to go - we need project teams and structures - we need to match student needs...we need to do a lot more about knowing what industry wants and then delivering this”... and as a result, graduate entrepreneurship for the Creative Industries is under-developed.

The creative university is therefore in an unparalleled position to help support and strengthen the growth and development of the Creative Industries. It has the potential to address entrepreneurship in the sector both inside and outside the curriculum, and both during and after undergraduate programmes, provided it shows a high leadership engagement and managerial strategies to do so. In recognition of this potential, the need to establish a national entrepreneurship task group for the creative university is possibly an urgent requirement.

It was obvious from the interviews that there presently there were some major barriers to developing and enhancing entrepreneurship in the creative university which includes: the university provision and organisation, student and other stakeholder expectations; and conflicts in government and pedagogic policy and practices (Craft, 2003).

3.2.3 Process Flexibility (PF)

Underpinning the need to move universities to a creative university was the present systems of management. In this respect, one respondent indicated that ...”we could be more flexible...in terms of our processes and the way we do things and talk to students”... and further advocated by another respondent ...”often the bureaucracy gets in the way. We cannot help this at the moment; it’s the way we do things here. Eventually, we will have to change”... It is indicated that the more flexible the university offering (Florida, 2004) the more likely that students will behave in an entrepreneurial way after graduation. This appears to be a major stumbling block to the development of a creative university.

3.2.4 Educational Networks (EN)

It would appear that as the creative university becomes more flexible in its management and provision, then staff are likely to need more training and support, as well as new skills (Kessler, 2000). As one respondent suggested ...”we must all engage in networking

– it is the future of education”... In order to attain the diverse pedagogic goals of a creative university, one respondent suggested that ...”most data will be on-line so it makes sense to network as well... leading to greater ...collaboration... A university cannot hope to have all the resources in the future, so we need to collaborate more”...

In this respect, it was recognised that the creative university would need to look externally towards other creative universities in the formation of possible grid-creative universities using learning and administrative activities that are linked through cloud-computing practices. Management would also appear therefore to need to engage in similar patterns of change and this will be reflected in a more virtual offering as ICT takes central stage in the management processes of the creative university.

3.3 What influences a CU to make fundamental changes to its management and operations to move towards a CU?

Main Theme

Creative Culture (CC)

3.3.1 Creative Culture (CC)

Respondents recognised that the culture of the university affected what the university management could do. As one respondent suggested ...”creative! We strive everyday to be creative. It’s creative this - creative that. It’s very hard. But we have to do for the sake of our students and their parents - and of course industry partners”... Compare this with the view espoused by Florida et al (2006) in that creative universities in the West often tend to be focused on the need to transfer research to industry, generate new inventions and patents, and spin-off its technology. This may be considered misplaced by some as it reflects a university’s operating cultural approach that Thailand’s universities may not want exploit, as the creative economy is growing (Cunningham, 2007) in the context of a university culture that is somewhat changing to a more participatory learning culture (McWilliam, 2007). This will also need to be considered in terms of moving the creative university towards performance distinction (Dweck, 1999) and away from the secular quality audit system (Strathern, 2000).

However, some respondents suggested that the difficulties of moving staff to a better future may not be as easy as once thought, as typified by one respondent who indicated that ...”I can see some people really looking forward to this. But others who have been here too long – maybe not. There will be structural changes and management will need to release the power strings! That’s not going to be so easy, is it?”... Correlate this view with Florida (2002) who intimates that we now have in universities the conditions for thinking and enacting a stronger relationship between pedagogy and the creative culture related to university learning and teaching (Zull, 2004). The overwhelming response on the university creative culture also suggests that as culture pervades everything that staff and students do, it will not be a simple task to make the necessary changes - and it will take time. Further, as suggested by one respondent that changing the culture will likely lead to the ...”need to build a more inclusive innovation system customised to support a local creative economy”... The creative university is thus poised to help make that connection as creativity is a key economic driver (Cunningham, 2006).

The outcome of this is the development and support of a creative workforce (Smith-Bingham, 2006). It is therefore an economic imperative that universities start producing more

'creative persons' (Fasko, 2002). Thus, co-producing becomes the norm - staff and students. However, the intensity of the creative envelope of a university in the local economy is fraught with problems and issues (Goldstein and Drucker, 2006).

One respondent signalled that it was an essential prerequisite to change the ..."overall university culture to one in which students and staff become active learners"..., (mirroring McWilliam, 2007) rather than inactive, passive participants (Author, 2009).

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this inquiry suggest that the creative university in Thailand has much to learn about its place in the creative economy; and as such also has much to do in terms of meeting its stakeholder needs. The research orientation here reflects an institutional creativity process, rather than an individual mind-set. It is thus group oriented, rather than individual. The eight characteristics discussed here further indicate that four are applicable to the university environment, whereas the other parameter - government funding (especially in the present economic situation) may have denigrating impact on creative developments at universities. One of the main reasons for this is that money itself does not predispose a university to move from its traditional offerings to becoming considered a "creative university".

The model as indicated in Figure 1(Appendix) shows how the various themes relate to each other and that Government Policy and Funding (GPF), Educational Networks (EN), and University Support (US) are considered to have external influence on university operations, ideology and management strategies. Process Flexibility (PF) and Entrepreneurial Development (ED) can be positively influenced within the university. Whereas, University Leadership (UL) and Stakeholders (S) are seen to consistently bridge the managerial requirements between university responses and university control matters.

Thus, creativity must be regarded as being much more than transforming or adding value to products, but rather it is an integral necessity; a major component of a sustainable creative economy (Florida, Gates, Knudsen and Stolarick, 2006) and a key determinant in the shaping of the future of Thai society. The future aim of the creative university is therefore to make all graduates future professional workers (Laing and Brabazon, 2007) with the skills and knowledge that the Thai creative economy needs and moving them towards a new ecology of learning and thinking balanced against the ethic of valuing risk taking (Keirl, 2004) and individualism. It is therefore a university transition to a terra incognita of a creative economy climate engendering universities towards a more creative ecology.

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APPENDIX

Table 1 - Research Questions and Major Themes

Research Question	Major Themes
What is the role of a creative university in the creative economy?	Government Policy and Funding (GPF)
	University Support (US)

	Stakeholders (S)
How does a university become a creative university?	University Leadership (UL)
	Entrepreneurial Development (ED)
	Process Flexibility (PF)
	Educational Networks (EN)
What influences a CU to make fundamental changes to its management and operations to move towards a CU?	Creative Culture (CC)

Table 2 - Main and Sub-Themes

Most discussed themes in the four interviews. TR: total number of references for the main theme		
Main Themes Derived	TR	Sub-Themes Highlighted
Government Policy and Funding (GPF)	9	Cost
		Funding
		Autonomy
University Leadership (UL)	23	Visionary Development
		Core Values
		Transformative
		Responsive
		Social Justice
Creative Culture (CC)	29	Learning Orientation
		Co-production
		Teams
		Technology
		University Structure
Entrepreneurial Development (ED)	19	Creative Production
		Social Relationships
		Co-Curriculum
		Collaborative Practices
Process Flexibility (PF)	5	Curriculum Development
		New Programmes
		Industry Needs
		Bureaucracy
		Skills Development

University Support (US)	15	Learning Skills
		Knowledge Building
		Work Skills
		Assess Creativity
Stakeholders (S)	11	Staff
		Students
		Parents
		Industry
Educational Networks (EN)	14	Educational Associations
		Technology
		Collaboration

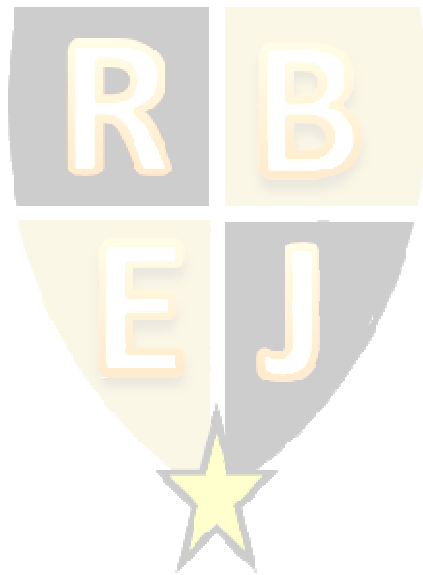


Figure 1 - Model of Research Outcomes

