



THAI HIGHER EDUCATION IN CRISIS: LAY OFF OF UNIVERSITY STAFF ON THE WAY

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ABSTRACT

The desire of the Thai people to continue studying at university level is in a decreasing trend. The major reasons comprise the reduced birth rates of the Thai people, the changing values in the need of a university degree and the economic situation of the country. Many programs have been closed down due to a lack of students, leading to restructuring and downsizing. Privatization may occur in certain cases. Mergers and acquisitions are seen in many universities and some of them may be faced with closing down. This paper aims to identify the following issues: (1) challenges faced by Thai universities; (2) possible negative consequences from the challenges affecting Thai universities; (3) possible effects of the consequences on human resource management of Thai universities; (4) processes for managing redundancy in Thai universities; and (5) processes for handling lay off in Thai universities.

Keywords: Higher Education, Crisis, Lay off, Thai University

INTRODUCTION

Several economic and social changes are taking place and are affecting the level of the need for higher education in Thailand. The major challenges include the decreasing Thai birth rate and changing values in the need of a university degree. In addition, the labor market is also changing to emphasize the needs for more skilled labor with a vocational education, rather than the need for professionals with a university degree. These changes, plus other challenges, are leading to the decline in the number of university students, causing various negative corrective actions by

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many universities, ranging from downsizing to closing down. These actions lead to redundancy and lay off of staff in universities. This paper aims to identify: (1) challenges faced by Thai universities; (2) possible negative consequences from the challenges affecting the Thai universities; (3) possible effects of the consequences on human resource management (HRM) of the Thai universities; (4) processes for managing redundancy in the affected Thai universities; and (5) processes for laying off of employees in the affected Thai universities.

CURRENT STATUS OF THAI HIGHER EDUCATION

There were 228 universities, both public and private, in Thailand in 2017 (Office of the Higher Education Commission. Online, retrieved 8 Oct 2018). A constant expansion of universities can be seen during the past decade. The number of universities rose from 145 in 2007 to 228 in 2017, in contrast to the decreasing trend in the number of students. The number of students during 2007 was 1,969,658 and it rose to the peak of 2,098,838 in 2013. It began to decline continuously from 2014 to the number of 1,843,982 in 2017. Despite the contrast of the two scenarios mentioned above, the number of university employees is in an increasing trend corresponding to the expansion of the universities. The number of employees was 142,045 in 2007 and in 2017 it rose to 204,620 (Joungtrakul, 2018b).

CHALLENGES TO THAI UNIVERSITIES

According to Joungtrakul (2018a), 15 challenges to Thai universities were identified. These challenges have been revised and regrouped to become 16 challenges, as shown in Figure 1 and can be briefly described as follows:

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

1. International Competition. New enrollments of university students in many developed countries are declining, including in the UK (UUK., 2017) and in the USA (Marccus, 2017). This situation has caused many famous universities in many countries to expand their recruitment of international students in Thailand.



2. **Disruptive Technologies.** The impact of disruptive technologies and innovation is widely recognized. While it is an opportunity for advancement, it could be a threat to many organizations. Higher education is being influenced by disruptive technologies in many ways, such as distance learning (Estelami, 2017) and massive open online courses (MOOC) (Hilmi, 2016).

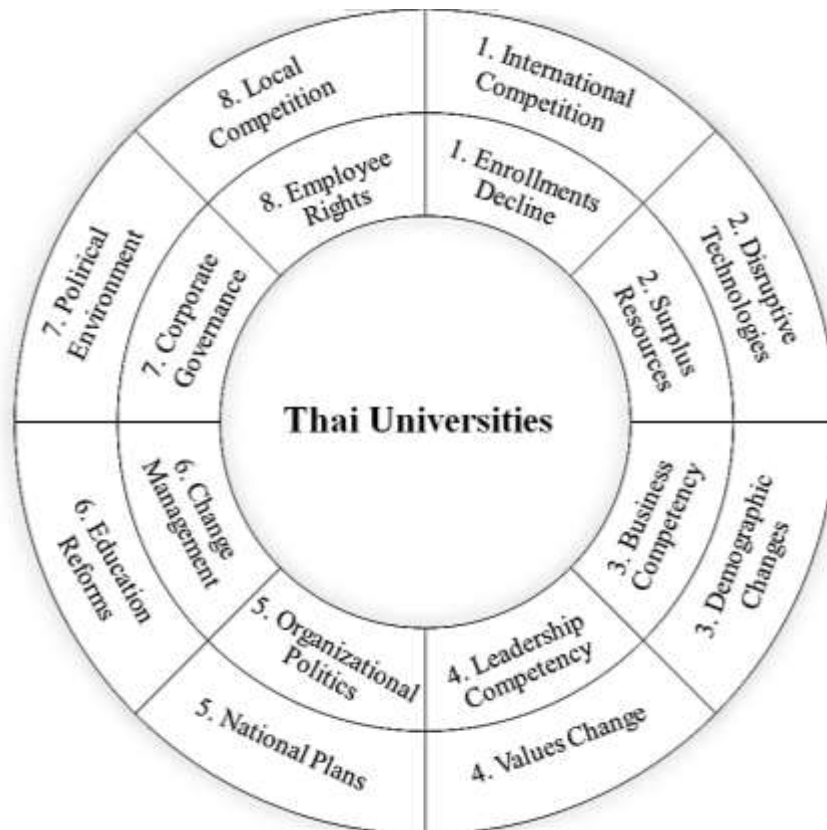


Figure 1. Challenges to Thai universities

Source: Adapted from Joungtrakul (2018a, p. 224)

3. **Demographic Changes.** The two major changes of the Thailand demographic are the decreasing birth rate and an ageing society. The declining fertility in Thailand was considered the fastest among current developing countries (Srithanaviboonchai et al. , 2014) . It affects the enrollments of new students in the universities. At the same time, Thailand has now become an ageing society (Haque, Soonthorndhada, Hunchangsith, & Kanchanachitra, 2016). Thai people live longer and work longer and reskilling is required for them to be able cope with new work and technological change.



4. **Values Change.** One very strong Thai value is that one must have a university degree. However, due to the surplus of university graduates, the employment rate of university graduates has been in a decreasing trend. It is the highest level when compared with secondary and primary education groups (Phaitoonpong, 2014). This has led to a decrease of the perceived need for continuing study at the university level.

5. **National Plans.** Thailand has been trapped as a middle-income economy for a long time (Jitsuchon, 2012). The Twelfth National Economic and Social Development Plan aimed to make Thailand a fully developed country with high average income at the end of the plan in 2021. To help accelerate the development to meet the objectives of the plan, the Thai Government is applying disruptive innovation and technologies in its development policies in the form of the Thailand 4.0 policy, promoting innovation at various levels and areas (BOI, 2017). At the same time, the Thailand National Strategic Plan was issued to provide a direction for national development (NESDB, 2018). As a result of these plans and policies more jobs are available to science and technology graduates and skilled labor at the vocational education level.

6. **Education Reforms.** The National Education Reform Act of 1999 is continuing to be implemented. A new Ministry of Higher Education is in the process of being established (Maesincee, 2018). In addition, government has issued a policy on promoting investment by foreign universities in Thailand. Foreign universities are given several privileges over Thai universities for establishment and operation in Thailand (Smith, 2017). Tax exemption is provided by the Board of Investment (BOI).

7. **Political Environment.** Thailand is now in the process of transferring from the current military government to an elected government. Many new policies on higher education from the new elected government party may be implemented. This could cause a lot of changes in managing the higher education system and universities (Wales, Magee, & Nicolai, 2016).

8. **Local Competition.** To relieve the government's burden on budgeting, a policy of public universities to become autonomous universities was implemented in the past decade. The change of status of public universities to become autonomous universities has created many negative results. In contrast to the threat of reduced birth rate and other challenges, several major unnecessary expansions in terms of infrastructure and staff took place in most universities. The



number of universities increased rapidly during the past decade (Joungtrakul, 2018a). This expansion has created strong competition for students among universities.

INTERNAL CHALLENGES

1. **Enrollments Decline.** Most universities are faced with a decreasing number of students, resulting from many reasons from both external and internal challenges, such as the decline of the Thai birth rate and international competition (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). This is in contrast to the surpluses of resources indicated above. This decline in enrollments causes problems to universities in many ways, especially as it reduces their major source of income and may lead to many kinds of organizational change in the universities.

2. **Surplus Resources.** Most universities are faced with resource surpluses in terms of infrastructure and human resources, due to various unreasonable expansion of universities in the past decade (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). At present, many new buildings are empty and many of the existing building are not being fully utilized. Academic staff and other types of staff are not being fully utilized and fixed costs are increasing, reducing the efficiency and effectiveness of the universities.

3. **Business Competency.** Most senior university administrators lack the business skills and experience required to run an autonomous university that needs to be managed in the management style of a business (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). Although a few of the senior administrators are from business, they are a minority and, coupled with the Thai cultural value of affording unreasonable respect to seniors, this situation caused inefficiency of the university management (Hoffman & Shipper, 2011).

4. **Leadership Competency.** Leadership is one of the most critical success factors in management of any organization (Tehreem, Nawaz, & Mahmood, 2013; Yukl, 2008). Weak leadership competency of university senior administrators, especially the chairman of the university council and the president, is found in most universities. Most of the chairmen and members of the university council are retired senior government officers, with ages ranging from 60 to 80 or above (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). While they have lots of experience in government, they are very conservative and focus on maintaining the *status quo*. A similar situation applies to the university



presidents. This situation has led to weak leadership in university administration, causing various unresolvable conflicts that harm the university's progress and development.

5. Organizational Politics. Organizational politics may cause inefficiency in the organization (Schneider, 2016). Most of the important university administrator positions, such as Dean and President, are filled by a political process using popularity votes from all types of staff as part of recruitment and selection. In some cases, there is continual fighting between support groups of the successful and the unsuccessful candidates, leading to strong and prolonged conflicts that cause serious harm to the universities.

6. Change Management. Most of major changes in universities have been implemented without applying properly change processes, leading to strong change resistance (Joungtrakul, 2016). It has led to serious conflicts and reduced the harmony of staff at all levels. Many cases have been brought to the administrative and criminal courts. A lot of time has been spent in fighting the court cases instead of using it for improving and developing the competitiveness of the universities.

7. Corporate Governance. Universities are expected to lead society and set good examples for all in order to be trusted for being able to produce highly competent graduates in all aspects, especially academically and ethically. The poor leadership and business management practices that have led to conflicts and fighting in universities indicate poor corporate governance in universities. This affects the reputation and performance of the universities (Heracleous, 2001).

8. Employee Rights. The exercising of employee rights in administrative court and criminal courts is an increasing trend (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). Most of the cases brought to the courts are considered unnecessary. This reflects one of the results of poor employee relations (ER) or industrial relations (IR) management (Joungtrakul, 2009). This part of the widely accepted HRM processes usually disappears from HRM in Thai universities. Communication is poorly managed at all levels in the organization. Poor ER and IR management lead to poor performance of the universities.



POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF CHALLENGES ON THAI UNIVERSITIES

As a result of the challenges identified above, Joungtrakul (2018a) identified seven possible consequences that may have negative effects on Thai universities, as shown in Figure 2.

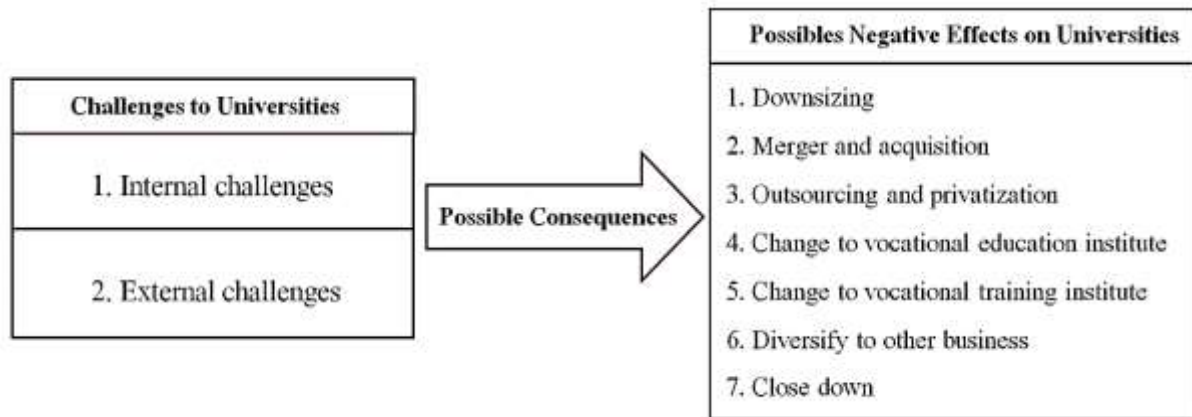


Figure 2. Possible effects of challenges on Thai universities

Source: Adapted from Joungtrakul (2018a, p. 230)

As a result of fewer students enrolling, most universities will be required to employ a downsizing strategy to be able to survive (Davis, Savage & Stewart, 2003). Some universities may have to merge with others in order to survive. In some private universities, acquisition by stronger Thai or foreign universities may take place (Arora & Kumar, 2012). As acquisition cannot be made in public universities, a strategy of management outsourcing by stronger Thai or foreign universities may take place (Pahirathan, 2017). However, privatization may apply in certain cases (Broucker & DeWit, 2013). Some Thai universities, both public and private, were upgraded from vocational colleges in the past twenty years. Some of them may change back to where they came from to be able to survive and serve the real needs of the country (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). Some Thai universities may diversify to become training institutes, as required by the labor market. They may merge with skills development institutes and centers, managed by the Department of Skills Development of the Ministry of Labor. This reform will serve the real needs of the country more efficiently and effectively (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). Some universities may diversify to become other businesses according to their expertise (e.g., research institute or consulting on a specific area, such as management consultancy) (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). Some universities may not be able to adapt themselves to cope with the challenges and may have to close down their



businesses (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b; Sunderman, Coghlan, & Mintrop, 2017). So, the Thai higher education system is considered to be in crisis now.

EFFECTS OF THE CHALLENGES ON HRM IN THAI UNIVERSITIES

Based on Joungtrakul (2018a), the organizational changes caused by the challenges described earlier could have serious impacts on HRM in Thai universities, as shown in Figure 3.

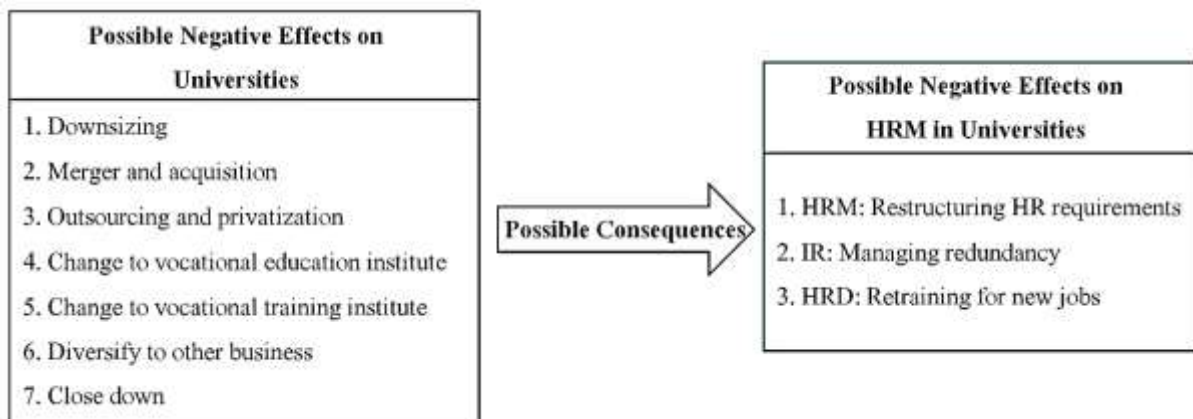


Figure 3. Results of the effects of the challenges on HRM in Thai universities

Source: Adapted from Joungtrakul (2018a, p. 231)

As indicated in Figure 3, organizational changes resulting from the challenges impacting on HRM in Thai universities in all three areas. The most severe impact includes redundancy that leads to termination or lay off of staff.

MANAGING REDUNDANCY IN THAI UNIVERSITIES

In general, redundancy means that “the employer no longer requires the services of employees, whether it is one person or the entire workforce” (Rose, 2001, p. 632). It should apply to “any situation where changes in the organization’s economic, operational or technological position results in a reduced labor level” (Salamon, 2000, p. 582). It means that the affected employees will no longer be employed by the organization. As a result of redundancy, employees are terminated from their employment. Redundancy may be voluntary or compulsory (Nyasha, 2016) and employees are laid off or dismissed through no fault of their own. To avoid or minimize



redundancy human resource planning (HRP) should be developed and managed effectively. HRP is defined as a “process of anticipating and making provision for the movement of people into, within, and out of an organization” (Bohlander & Snell, 2004, p. 128). When the need for more people occurs, recruitment, both internal and external, is conducted to achieve the needed applicants for vacancies and placement (Mondy, 2010; Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2011). When the business is in a downturn period, several measures are considered and implemented, such as productivity improvement, cost containment and continuous improvement in order to minimize the needs for redundancy and lay off, which should be used as a last resort (Rose, 2001; Salamon, 2000).

HANDLING LAY OFF IN THAI UNIVERSITIES

Laying off of staff has several negative impacts on management, organizations, employees and their families, including the society at large (Akdogan & Cingoz, 2009; Flanagan & O' Shaughmessy, 2005). Thus, every effort must be made by university management to avoid or minimize the impact of lay off. When lay off is unavoidable the procedure for handling lay off, as shown in Figure 4, should be applied (Alberta Government., 2012).

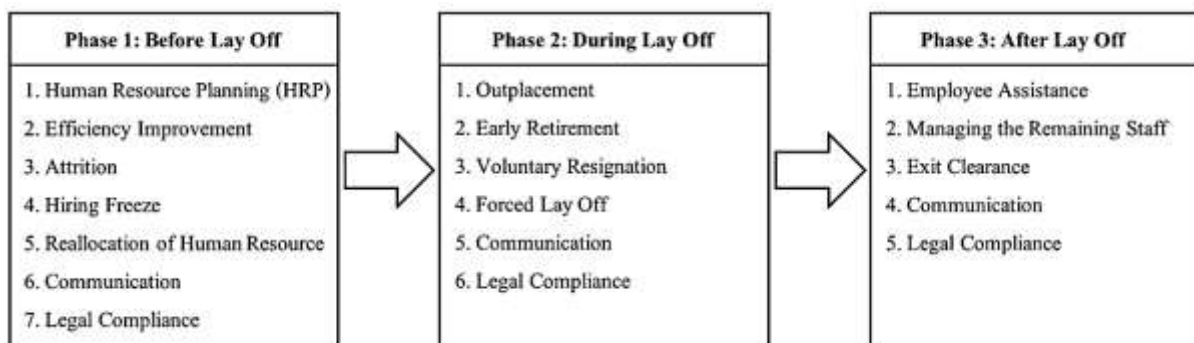


Figure 4. The process for handling lay off in Thai universities

Phase 1: Before Lay Off. All organizations should be managed with appropriate human resource requirements in order to continue the improvement of organizational efficiency and effectiveness. HRP should be carefully developed and balanced for both the needs for additional staff and the needs for reduction of staff. HRP should be reviewed and monitored carefully and continually.



Various continuous improvement programs should be in place and implemented continually to avoid surplus and redundancy of staff. When faced with the imbalance of workload and the fact that fewer staff are required, attrition strategies should be applied. A hiring freeze should apply if the situation is still not improved. Reallocation of staff should apply in parallel with attrition and a hiring freeze, such as reassignment, demotion and transfer. Communication should be made with management and employees to keep them informed of the situation. All legal requirements must be followed (i.e., advanced notice and reduction of compensation when demotion action is taken).

Phase 2: During Lay Off. If various actions taken in the first phase do not yield desirable results, further steps may be implemented. In order to reduce the number of employees to the required number, an outplacement program may be employed. This action will also help employees to gain new employment. An early retirement program may then be implemented for those eligible employees. Voluntary resignation with incentives or a buyout program may apply if the previous programs did not produce the desirable results. Forced lay off should be the last resort to be employed. Communication should be made with management and employees and all other stakeholder groups to keep them informed of the situation. All legal requirements must be followed (i.e., advanced notice and redundancy payment and all required reports to related government agencies when forced lay off is implemented).

Phase 3: After Lay Off. All employees, both the laid off and the employees who are selected to retain their employment, are affected by lay off in many ways, so that various programs should be established and implemented. An employee assistance program for laid off employees and their family may include: finding new jobs, training for new skills, counselling and financial management. Exit clearance activities must be handled properly (i.e., reemployment priority list, updating employee information and contact addresses, returning of employer's property and all payment dues are made). Programs for managing and motivating the remaining employees may include: career management and development, including various morale motivation and special reward programs. Communication should be made with management and employees and all other stakeholder groups to keep them informed of the situation. All legal requirements must be followed.



DISCUSSION

Challenges to Thai Universities: Thai universities face several challenges, both internal and external challenges (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). The internal challenges that have the strongest impact on universities are the politics in the organization, coupled with the weakness of leadership and a lack of business management competencies, plus the lack of good governance of university administrators. These challenges have led to the abuse or misuse of authority and unresolvable conflicts and problems in many universities. The external challenges that have strongest impact on Thai universities are the reduced Thai birth rate that has led to the reduced number of students. The fierce competition among Thai universities themselves from both public and private and foreign universities, both abroad and in Thailand itself, has caused many Thai universities to be faced with various internal administrative problems that have required self-adjustments.

Possible Effects of Challenges on Thai Universities: Seven negative consequences were identified, ranging from downsizing to the closure of the business (Joungtrakul, 2018a, 2018b). Downsizing could occur in both public and private universities. Many programs have already been closed down, resulting in restructuring of their internal organization structure. Mergers among public universities are being considered in many cases. Many Thai private universities were taken over by stronger Thai universities and investors from abroad. As Thai public universities could not be sold, a strategy of management outsourcing may be employed by either the stronger Thai public or by private or foreign universities. Privatization may apply in certain cases. Some universities may scale down from their current sizes and businesses to a smaller or lower level institution to serve the real needs of labor market at the technical and vocational levels. Some of them may diversify their business and restructure themselves to become technical or vocational training centers or institutes to provide short courses according to the real needs of the labor market. Some universities may diversify themselves into other business based on their strengths and expertise, such as research and development institutes working with industrial or commercial sectors to create innovation and development of new products to support the



development of the country. Some of them may become specialized consulting firms in their areas of expertise, such as science and engineering or management consultants. In the end, if some of them could not survive, a closure of the business may finally take place.

Effects of the Challenges on HRM in Thai Universities: HRM in Thai universities are affected by the challenges in many ways (Joungtrakul, 2018a). The impacts range from a minor one, such as adjustment of university HRP and reallocation of staff, to the most serious impact of redundancy and permanent layoff of staff at all levels and all three types (i.e., administrator, academic, and supporting staff). Layoff could result from all types of change, ranging from downsizing to closing down of the business. HRP in Thailand usually involves one-sided planning, especially in universities. Most of them have planned for more staff in an incremental way, without planning for less staff when affected by economic and social change challenges. Most of them do not have a contingency plan to meet the situation when faced with a surplus of staff. Redundancy policies and procedures do not exist in most universities. This situation leads to the needs for redundancy policies and procedures to be developed for implementation in Thai universities.

Managing Redundancy in Thai Universities: Redundancy and lay off affect organizations in many ways, including the reputation of the organization (Flanagan & O'Shaughnessy, 2005). Universities are expected to be the best example to other organizations in all areas, especially ethics, good governance and management. Well planned and fair policies on redundancy and lay off must be promulgated and be ready to be employed when needed. HRP must be properly developed and a closely monitored system must be in place. All legal requirement items must be complied with and redundancy and related payments must be reserved and made according to the industrial laws. Step-by-step procedures for redundancy or lay off are required.

Handling Lay Off in Thai Universities: Lay off is foreseeable in both public and private universities in Thailand. However, it should be the last resort to be implemented (Rose, 2001; Salamon, 2000). Every effort must be made by the administrative teams to ensure that the university is able to compete and survive. However, if all efforts used have failed and lay off is necessary, it must be fairly handled with care. The process of lay off proposed in this paper will help university



administrators to be able to develop their policies and procedures for layoff of staff effectively. The most important parts of the policies and procedures are communication and legal compliance. Buyout strategy or extra or special allowances may be employed to show the best practice in university management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that: (1) A redundancy policy and procedure based on the proposed process for managing layoff in Thai universities, as specified in Figure 4, should be developed and announced to all university staff and all stakeholders; (2) When a situation requires it, all steps specified in the policy and procedure should be implemented carefully. Participation of all stakeholder groups is required, especially employees and line management at all levels, from the program chair or section head of supporting staff upward to the dean or director of institutes and top management; (3) Special communication programs may be established and managed effectively for certain groups of employees. Relationships with government organizations must be closely coordinated and key stakeholders kept informed of the progress and movement of the project; (4) All legal requirements must be complied with (e.g., advanced notice, severance pay packages); and (5) A legal and HR expert advisory team or committee may be established to provide advisory and consultation services to responsible persons.

PAPER INFORMATION

The original version of this paper, entitled “A Time to Lay Off: Thai Universities on Fire!”, was presented at the HR4ASIA Conference, on 26 October 2018 at Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand.



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