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The emergence of COVID-19, Thailand, world and their adaptational challenges: The burden for different generations

Purpose and context of the presentation

The presentation overviews the context of education in Thailand in the pandemic by examining how different generations are affected in different ways by the pandemic and considering examples of how course delivery has changed due to the switch to online education.

Generational differences

Even before the pandemic, the changing generations have come with changing needs and attitudes towards education. Baby boomers have given way to Generation X and Y lecturers, whilst the current group of undergraduates comprises Generation Z, followed by Generation Alpha currently at school. Generation Z has a reputation of being difficult to teach, even before the pandemic.

Many Thai students have reported feeling depressed and isolated due to being unable to continue their normal social activities because of COVID-19. Many have left their university accommodation and returned home to save costs. Lecturers from older generations have the experience of the SARS virus to put the current crisis into perspective and they have been able to build resilience, but the younger students have not had this opportunity. Building resilience and bravery amongst students in the face of an unknown future is an important additional duty that lecturers now have.

Younger generations use their mobile phones frequently, to the extent that they also do their online learning on their phones rather than on laptops or computers. This poses a challenge to lecturers. For example, if lecturers tried to conduct a three-hour lecture, a mobile phone's battery would lose its charge and the phone would become too hot. This led to students dropping in and out of lectures, which was detrimental to their concentration and prevented them from accessing the full content. When students were asked to explain what they had heard and what they had learned, they often were unable to do so, suggesting that they were not learning. Some students are also disadvantaged financially and do not have a powerful enough phone or other device to access online learning.

Generation Z, the current university student cohort, has a strong sense of self-direction and resists more traditional, authoritarian educational attitudes. If Generation Z does not understand or does not do the work, lecturers cannot respond with blame or criticism, as they once would have. This generation responds to such censure with strong defence mechanisms

Presentation Summary - Extracted Key Points from September AAAF Presentations

and will block or reject any further attempts from that lecturer to teach them. Lecturers are having to learn more collaborative approaches, with a focus on students' rights and freedoms rather than expectations and duty. When lecturers approach activities by explaining the reasons for them and the consequences for not doing them, and inviting students to participate, they are more successful and are able to elicit more creativity and innovation from students than if they simply tell students they are expected to participate.

Generation Z also has other characteristics which are causing difficulties for lecturers, including low resilience and perseverance, so that they often give up if a project is too long-term or complex. They also have more limited concentration, unable to pay attention for longer than around half an hour before becoming distracted. These students have also shown a limited sense of accountability for their own learning, for example by not working together in online breakout groups if the lecturer is not present in the group.

Generation Z has reported that they feel the older generations are more selfish, self-righteous, conservative and authoritarian. They also report preferring to work as entrepreneurs than as office workers like their own parents. This can lead to students dropping out of university to work for themselves, and not valuing a completed higher education degree or the intrinsic value of higher education learning. They cannot see the point of too much theory unless it is clearly related to practice. They tend to make fast decisions without considering long-term consequences.

Ultimately, both older and younger generations can learn from each other and develop stronger mindsets if they can learn to understand each other.

Adapting to online education: ongoing challenges

Practical activities are difficult to adapt to online. One course included a modern entrepreneur unit. In face-to-face times, Students set up a temporary flea market and worked in teams to choose a product, calculate the break-even point and how many units they would like to sell, conduct sales and finish by presenting how much profit or how much loss they have made. That is, students learned within an authentic context. Once large gatherings were prohibited, this could not occur. Instead, students were encouraged to use online marketing and business tools to identify a product, its price, its distribution channel and a promotion strategy with the intent that eventually the students would be able to bring their product and sell it in a real market. Powerby, SPSS and Lucidchart were all programs introduced to students to help them with their online development of products and marketing.

Unfortunately, large gatherings continued to be prohibited, and so the lecturer changed again and encouraged students to learn how to sell their products online through platforms like Shoppee, Lazada and Kaidee (a Thai platform). This also became unviable, as eventually students were unable to visit post offices to post their sold products. They eventually had no choice but to pretend that they would be selling their products online, and to present business plans with what they would do. There was no way to actually test the plans in the real world.