

Thai...? No need to be shy!

Our school has recently enjoyed a visit from 17 students completing Teacher Education courses at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia.

These young people spent three weeks in Bangkok practicing their teaching skills under the supervision of their accompanying lecturer and guided by co-operating teachers from the school.

This is an example of the increasing internationalization of university education around the world and our school is happy to play a role in it. To highlight the global nature of the experience one need only point to the fact that the visiting student teachers came from three different countries. Most were from Australia, but 3 were from Canada and one was Indonesian – indicative that, as the 21st century unfolds, university students are increasingly undertaking at least part of their studies outside their homeland. This has been necessary in the past for students from poorer countries to access the courses and

facilities available only in the wealthier ones. Now, however, it is much more of a free choice.

It may also be the result of government or university policy. Some Scandinavian countries, for example, have decided not to expand their own universities to meet the growth or diversity in students' demand for places, but instead provide financial assistance for students to undertake their studies abroad. Of course, it is easier for Scandinavian students, who have a high level of English ability by the time they finish secondary schooling.

Deakin University has a clear policy to internationalise their curriculum. This means not only that students must learn more of the culture and contribution of countries in the Asia-Pacific region, but also that they have opportunities to live and work in those countries as part of their education. Hence, universities such as Deakin in Melbourne and Griffith in Brisbane assist students to undertake short experiences, such as the recent teaching practice program at here, or possibly longer ones, such as completion of a year of studies at a Thai university.

Thai universities have been participating in these international exchanges for many years now, sometimes using their lab schools as well. Private bilingual schools are pleased to also offer their services to overseas universities and schools for mutual benefit.

The writer remembers the days of the Colombo Plan, an initiative of SEATO (the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation). It was a major provider of international study opportunities for Thai students (and others in the region) – and it was largely one-way. English-speaking nations such as Australia and the US supplied the financial means whereby Thai students could go to those countries for significant parts of their education. There was no reverse flow, however, with the occasional exception of a Thai academic being invited to lecture in Thai Studies programs in Western universities. We did not see Australian or American students coming to Thailand for their education (though there were some exchange students who came for the cultural experience and a few Thai Studies specialists at universities here).

Fortunately, things have now changed. Not only can Thai students do their university studies in English through the international programs in Thai universities, but these programs attract foreign students as well. Thais no longer have to be shy that, whereas they must go abroad for educational experiences, no one comes here for that reason. That is no longer the case. Thailand is increasingly recognized as a location that can offer good formal and informal, short and long-term education opportunities to people from other countries in the region and further abroad.

Our school has, for a number of years now, hosted students from its partner school in Brisbane, Australia. These students come for about seven weeks over the Christmas-New Year period. In the past year the school has begun to take in exchange students from Japan also and it is expected that, from 2007, we will begin to host students from China. The City University of Hong Kong has selected its best students from the BA TESOL program to come to our school for two weeks to observe our classes. This program will be taken on by the Chinese University of Hong Kong starting in May 2007. The

Australian Catholic University has also sent graduate students here for extended teaching practice (nine weeks).

More and more Australian universities and schools are going to look for Thai schools to help them enrich the experience of their students. Bilingual schools are well placed to help these universities. The schools also benefit from the presence of foreign students and student teachers. Our students experience innovative teaching methods and the refreshing company of young people of their own age or not many years older. They also have to communicate with them in English, whether the visiting students come from Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Japan or China. Our students realize just how much the world uses English for communication among its diverse peoples. Learning English bilingually has authentic practical value for them.

The development of bilingual education in this country provides the platform on which the international exchanges described above can take place. Bilingual education gives Thai students and teachers the ability to communicate with visitors and provides a context in which the visitors can do

meaningful things (such as participate in or teach classes). This form of education can truly enable two-way learning of language and culture to take place.

Thai universities and schools, and particularly Thai models of bilingual education, are now the focus of increasing interest in other countries. There will be more requests from abroad for interaction, exchange and further education opportunities, especially in the bilingual schools and the university international programs. Thai schools and universities providing courses and programs to foreign students in any form have a special responsibility, not only to provide high quality education for all their students, but also to represent Thailand as a place where the world can come and get a really good educational and life experience.