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# THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT FOR THAI-CANADIAN COLLABORATION ON EDUCATION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been the largest disruption to education systems in the post-war era, having impacted more than 1.6 billion learners in over 190 countries. The closure of schools and other learning facilities has affected 94 percent of the global student population. In Thailand and across most parts of the world, the fresh wave of COVID-19 is threatening to plunge students into a deeper loss of academic skills and knowledge resulting from lack of class time and ineffective online learning. There is tremendous opportunity for Canadian EdTech companies to help build a mature digital learning ecosystem in Thailand.

Dr. John McGrath, the Canadian Superintendent of the Thai Chinese International School commented, "In education we have a saying that there are no problems, just opportunities. The pandemic has indeed hit educators as dramatically as it has affected family life. The systems that educators have used for centuries are based on a model that in many ways no longer reflects society's needs. While the traditional books and pencils have been replaced with tablets and smartphones the basic model for education has been slower to respond. The needs of 21st Century learners are evident and education has a perfect opportunity to reimagine itself. This does not mean that traditional education is no longer relevant, it is. Creating independent learners, creative mindsets, and global citizens are still cornerstones. It is the 'how' that must change. Currently educators are being bombarded with online solutions and must decide which ones are a substitution and which ones are an innovation, this is one of the key to the future."

EdTech companies are already successfully doing what Dr. McGrath is calling for in Thailand. Code.org, a US-based organization that teaches computer science in schools has partnered with Thailand's Digital Economy Promotion Agency (DEPA) to create Coding Thailand, a website to teach children as young as four years old the basic coding skills needed to get started on programming. Local EdTech start-ups like ConicleX are expanding as well. This Thai EdTech start-up, which raised US\$3 million in Series-A fund-

ing in April focuses on providing learning solutions for corporates.

Ever since the first wave of coronavirus hit Thailand early last year, students have done most of their learning online rather than in classrooms. Initially, schools and universities throughout the Kingdom frantically rushed to maintain academic continuity through "emergency remote teaching" as the pandemic prevented teachers to deliver on-campus learning. In many instances, that meant integrating into their syllabi ready-made, online courseware available from reputable, well-known organizations. What began as short-term emergency response will most likely become a lasting digital transformation of education in the long run.

While the crisis is subsiding in parts of the country, normalcy remains elusive. Thailand's educational institutions need to do more because online learning will likely evolve into an integral element in the future of schooling. The critical questions educational institutions are asking themselves include: Which classes need to be reimaged for online delivery; and, what material can be directly transmitted without causing major loss of knowledge or experiential learning? Thai educational institutions must quickly address these considerations.

Depending on the school or university's stage of digital transformation, Thai educators and Canadian EdTech companies could work collaboratively to innovate teaching practises and learning methodologies by applying new technology. However, how does one determine an educational institution's stage of digital transformation? The three main stages are:

Digital new entrants. Most educational institutions in rural and parts of urban Thailand would fall into this category. These institutions offer almost no courses online and teachers lack online teaching experience. Moreover, students and teachers in these institutions have little to no access to software and hardware. Furthermore, these geographic regions are characterized by poor internet connection. Many of Thailand's



rural elementary schools have been left behind as COVID has forced an urgent shift to online learning, shedding even more light on the digital divide and widening the gap between children in rural and urban areas. Well-respected academic Sompong Jitradub said online learning can only be effective if students have consistent access to the internet and computers. His research has found that 66% of surveyed students have no computer and 57 percent do not have home internet. Canadian EdTech firms that can help bridge the digital divide will be welcome.

Digital early adopters. Educational institutions in parts of urban Thailand would be in this category. These institutions have used online learning in the past and have basic digital infrastructure in place as well as seasoned instructors to adequately teach students online. However, these institutions need to quickly upgrade their software and hardware capabilities to enhance their in-and-out of class learning. Such institutions must intensify their digital transformation path by creating a team dedicated to formulating and executing an online strategy. The Thai Chinese International School (TCIS) is a good example of this category. Its educators had the foresight at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis to rapidly adopt digital teaching methods earlier than many other schools in Thailand. TCIS effectively weathered the first wave of COVID-19 and better positioned itself for the subsequent waves. Canadian EdTech firms can service digital early adopters by helping them create a center of academic innovation, dedicated to driving the educational institutions digital strategy.

Digital innovators. A few of Thailand's leading institutions are digital innovators. These institutions have a sturdy infrastructure to support online learning and their educators are competent in their abilities to teach online content. The educators at these advanced institutions are able to create their own online learning content such as online lectures and digital textbooks. Partnering with digital innovators is beneficial due to their content and expertise and they are therefore poised to become leading figures in the advancement of Thailand's digital learning ecosystem. Chulalongkorn University is a prime example. Its Learning Innovation Center, dedicated to academic innovation, is driving the university's digital strategy and its rapid adoption. Digital innovators are best positioned to delve into immersive technologies. Canadian EdTech companies providing Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) in fields like engineering and medicine would be best positioned to service these advanced institutions.

Educational institutions in Thailand are no longer viewing digital transformation solely as a form of achieving personalized education, quick upgrades to schooling methods and greater public access. Rather, digital transformation also now serves the purposes of risk mitigation should another future black swan event arise whereby Thai students would not physically be in class for long intervals of time. This is an opportune moment for Canadian EdTech companies to work with Thai schools and universities to enhance the building of Thailand's digital learning ecosystem.



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