

# Helping Thai Students Succeed in Sweden

Kottbullar, snö and Ikea. When young Thai students go abroad to Sweden to study they have to get ready for a big cultural difference. And thanks to the Swede Peter Bjork they are fully prepared. He has a study preparation programme that teaches the Thais about Sweden before take off. The successes rate speaks for itself.

*By Rikke Bjerger Johansen*



*SWEA gave out a stipend 2008, a flight ticket from Bangkok to Stockholm*

There is always a risk that students give up half way through their studies. Especially if the students are from a foreign country on the other part of the world and have to cope with a major cultural shock as well as the study itself. But when Thai students are arriving to their new country they know what to expect. And the result is obvious. Almost every one of the students who have prepared themselves makes it through the one or two years of study in the cold, Scandinavian country called Sweden.

Peter Bjork is the man behind the study preparation programme for Thai exchange students who are going to Sweden to take their master. His programme RMUTK has now been running for five years and he is very happy with the result so far.

"About 200 Thai students have taken our preparation programme before going to Sweden for a master degree. You can say that we have

success rate close to 100 percent and that makes me very proud," Peter Bjork says.

He gives an example why it is important for his students to prepare before studying abroad.

"There is a big risk that Asian students will drop out during the study if they are not prepared. It can be culture differences, the study process is very different, the food is strange. As an example one University in Thailand had a failure of 70 percent of their students before they started preparing them. Now, almost all of them come back with a degree," he explains.

## Need for preparation

51-years old Peter Bjork is originally from Karlstad, one of the cities where the Thais are sent to university. He is educated in change management and came to Bangkok 10 years ago to help the Thai companies after the Asian crisis. Then he got involved with universities, started lecturing and

became a consultant.

"At the universities I witnessed Thai students going to study abroad in Europe. I also saw the need for them to be well prepared. That's why I together with my business partner Dr. Toni Ivergard started developing a programme in order to help them succeed with their masters."

The way he developed it was by talking to former students combined with his own Swedish/Thai knowledge. He also cooperates with the Swedish embassy, church, and other institutes.

## Win-win situation

The preparation programme which takes one semester, consists of three parts:

1. Academic studies in English
2. Swedish and Scandinavian culture and language
3. Practical preparation

The Thai students always get surprised about certain things.

"They are surprised to discover that Sweden and the Scandinavian countries in general are in top in all the measures regarding economy, wealth fare, study system, education level. The same goes for creativity, business, fashion, music export. They didn't know that before, they only thought it was the US and UK".

Apart from all the practical knowledge Peter also explains a main factor for why his programme is working out so well.

"We use former students who can help them like a mentor. But most importantly, the Thais get a network with other students before travelling away. They make friends with each other before they go to the new country," Peter explains.

His students come from all the big universities in Thailand where there is an exchange agreement with Sweden. They students pay 35.000 baht for being enrolled in the preparation course that takes one semester on the RMUTK University in Sathorn in Bangkok.

"We don't actually make a profit, but we cover fee for teachers, classroom and the practical preparation. You can say it is a win-win situation for everybody. The families pay a lot to send their child abroad to study and it is a waste of money if the child quits half way through. Now, everybody is happy. The students don't let their family down and the

universities in Sweden get prepared students," says Peter, who personally escorts the Thais to their universities in August every year.

## Silence is the worst

However, even though how well prepared the Thais are, there will always be situations that know one can prepare them for.

"The biggest problem for them is the silence. In Bangkok there are always so many people around them. But in a Swedish town, especially during winter time, it can seem very quite when they get home from school. But within the first month they learn how to speak out and make friends. They are doing very well," he says.

Actually, most of the Thais love studying in Sweden and about 30 per cent say that they will like to continue studying in their new home country for a second master or a Ph.D.

"In the beginning I was surprised to see how well they adjusted. It is so rewarding having this job. The young people are so positive about Sweden. They come to us for preparation and the result is so good. Some now work with Scandinavian companies, 15 of our students have been working on the SE embassy. For sure it helps their future with a Swedish master," Peter Bjork says proudly.

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The preparation programme's 3 steps:

1. Academic studies in English. The Thais have to pass many tests, they must improve their English and the lectures are in a Scandinavian way, more free and independent.
2. Swedish and Scandinavian culture and language. Try to give them a good in-depth of it so they don't get shocked when they arrive. They will learn about the study system, culture, language, food, geography, history.
3. Practical preparation. Everything regarding admission process, what programme they should choose, the application, ticket, visa, food, clothing, how to deal with a snow storm, how to get around in Sweden and other basic and practical things.



*The Swedish priest Lennart Hamark is teaching the Thais at the preparation course.*

Peter's students are going to different universities in Sweden: Mälardalen in Västerås, Karlstad, Kalmar and Malmö.

The exchange students come from different universities in BKK - Chulalongkorn, Thammasat, Assumption and others, but they register for the programme in RMUTK in Sathorn, Bangkok.