

A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES OF ACS WASC ACCREDITATION PREPARATION IN KING MONGKUT'S INTERNATIONAL DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL

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Abstract: The aim of this research study was to identify the challenges of King Mongkut's International Demonstration School (KMIDS) on the Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACS WASC) accreditation preparation, from the perspective of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators and teachers. For this purpose, the researchers built and implemented an in-depth, structured interview protocol, which was conducted one-on-one with 17 participants. Member-checking and triangulation techniques were used in combination with notes from the observations and document reviews in order to ensure internal validity. The researchers applied a systematic qualitative design, consisting of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, to analyze and interpret the collected data. Such inductive and deductive qualitative process led to the identification of 14 themes and 24 sub-themes oriented around the six categories of ACS WASC initial visit framework. Regarding "Organization for student learning", there were four main challenges and eight sub-challenges found. Regarding "Curriculum, instruction and assessment", there were two main challenges and six sub-challenges found. Regarding "Support for student personal and academic growth", there were two main challenges and two sub-challenges found. Regarding "Resource management and development", there were one challenge and two sub-challenges found. Regarding "ONESQA standards for Thai language and Thai studies", there were two main challenges and two sub-challenges found. Regarding "Boarding program", there were three challenges found. Finally, recommendations for different stakeholders in relation to the six categories of ACS WASC initial visit framework, as well as for future researchers, are presented.

Keywords: Challenges, ACS WASC, accreditation preparation, King Mongkut's International Demonstration School.

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Introduction

Accreditation is an essential element for educational institutes, schools or colleges, because it is the recognition that an institute maintains standards mandated by the accrediting organization, and guarantees that the education provided by such institute meets an acceptable level of quality.

Since a new paradigm of teaching and learning is likely to shift to student-centric and the needs of 21st century, many schools are facing challenges in relation to student learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018). ACS WASC, one of the renowned accreditation agencies, has developed the research-based framework for new international schools called “Initial Visit Criteria”, intended to promote student achievements by including the following six categories to investigate schools to be accredited (ACS WASC, 2017): organization for student learning; curriculum, instruction and assessment; support for student personal and academic growth; resource management and development; ONESQA standards for Thai language and Thai studies; and boarding program. Criteria on these categories directly state the emphasis on student learning and how the school will foster it through management tools that ACS WASC guides through accreditation process.

King Mongkut’s International Demonstration School (KMIDS) was founded in 2016. The school is recognized as the first international demonstration school in Thailand to specialize in mathematics, science and technology under King Mongkut’s Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (KMITL), one of the autonomous universities affiliated with Thai Ministry of Education. It is required by Thailand’s educational policies that all international schools must be accredited from an overseas accreditation organization within six years after the school received the license from the Office of Private Education Commission (Office of Private Education Commission, 2017). Accordingly, the KMIDS Board of Directors made a decision to have KMIDS affiliated with and supervised by ACS WASC, and assign the school leadership team to prepare in initial visit, the first step of a long-term accreditation process. During the accreditation preparation period of KMIDS, relevant stakeholders, consisting of two school administrators, one school supervisor, two ACS WASC coordinators and 25 teachers, were assigned in ACS WASC working groups, in which they will be collaborating and working on each assigned specific assignment. While school administrators facilitate the accreditation process, ACS WASC coordinators and ACS WASC working groups work in cooperation with the school supervisor who gives advice in general.

In preparing for initial accreditation, and before an on-site initial visit scheduled for March or April 2020, the shared challenges that KMIDS will probably encounter, based on ACS WASC recommendations on other schools or the self-study report of other schools (such as involvement of academic staff to foster student learning, community engagement in making decision, schoolwide action plan, curriculum or co-curricular activities that support student growth, etc.) are observed and documented by the school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators and assigned teachers.

Research Objectives

The main objective driving this research was to identify the challenges of King Mongkut's International Demonstration School on ACS WASC accreditation preparation from the perspective of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinator and teachers.

This main research objective was divided into the following six sub-objectives.

1. To identify the challenges of King Mongkut's International Demonstration School on ACS WASC accreditation preparation in relation to organization for student learning from the perspective of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators and teachers.
2. To identify the challenges of King Mongkut's International Demonstration School on ACS WASC accreditation preparation in relation to curriculum, instruction and assessment from the perspective of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators and teachers.
3. To identify the challenges of King Mongkut's International Demonstration School on ACS WASC accreditation preparation in relation to support for student personal and academic growth from the perspective of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators and teachers.
4. To identify the challenges of King Mongkut's International Demonstration School on ACS WASC accreditation preparation in relation to resources management and development from the perspective of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators and teachers.
5. To identify the challenges of King Mongkut's International Demonstration School on ACS WASC accreditation preparation in relation to ONESQA standards for Thai language and Thai studies

from the perspective of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators and teachers.

6. To identify the challenges of King Mongkut's International Demonstration School on ACS WASC accreditation preparation in relation to boarding program from the perspective of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators and teachers.

Theoretical Framework

In this qualitative study, the researchers applied the research-based framework called "ACS WASC initial visit criteria", including "ONESQA standards for Thai language and Thai studies" and grounded theory as the framework of the study.

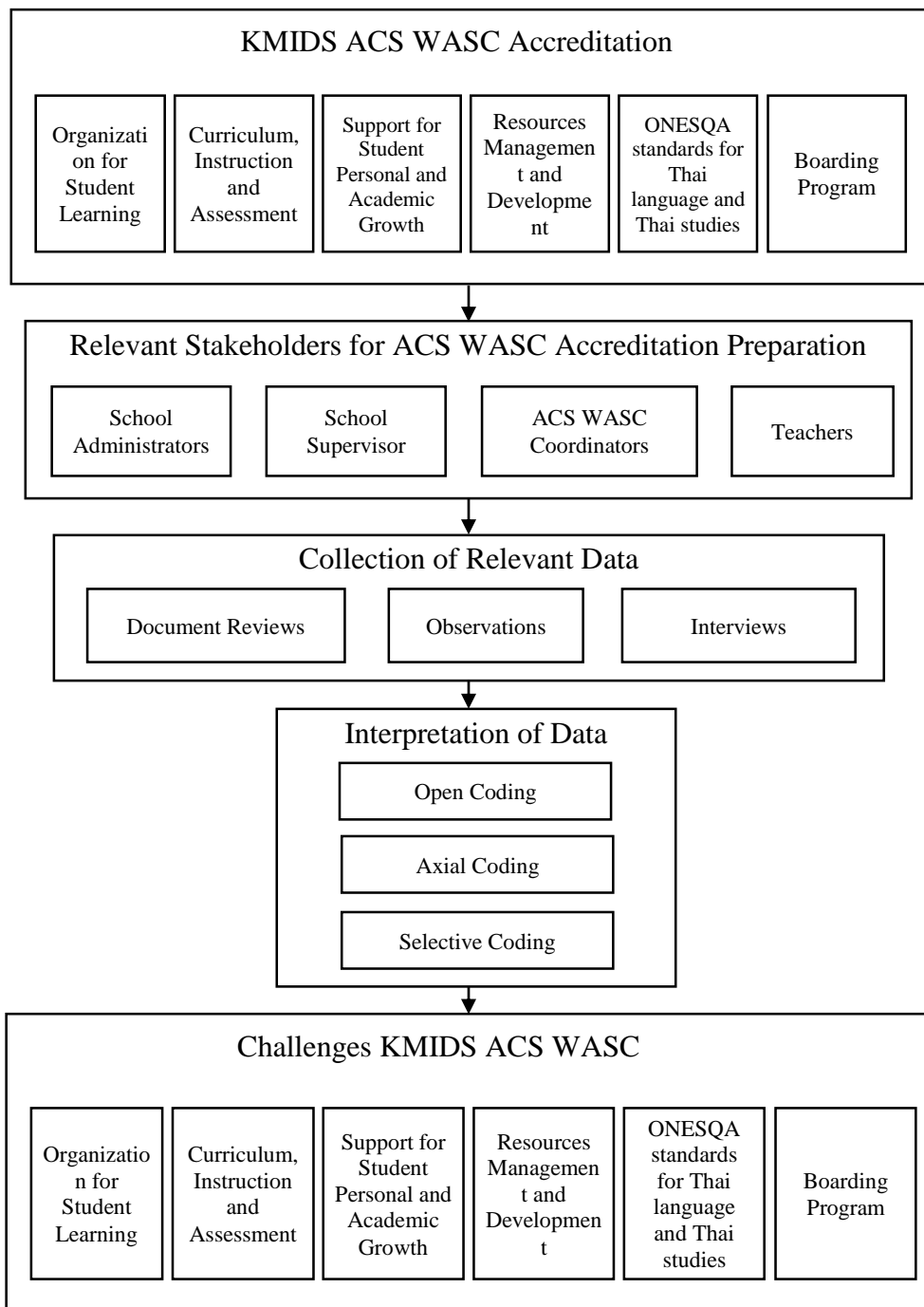
The ACS WASC initial visit criteria serve as a blueprint for new international schools in preparing for their initial accreditation. This framework is comprised of six categories, namely (1) organization for student learning; (2) curriculum, instruction and assessment; (3) support for student personal and academic growth; (4) resources management and development; (5) ONESQA standards for Thai language and Thai studies; and (6) boarding program. All were used as the theoretical basis to develop the structured interview questions and observation field notes.

Because of the qualitative nature of this study, grounded theory was implemented in the data analysis process. Grounded theory involves the progressive identification and integration of categories from data. It provides researchers with guidelines on how to identify categories, how to make links between categories and how to establish relationships between them. Then, researchers continue to sample and code data until no new categories can be identified, and until new instances of variation for existing categories have ceased to emerge (Willig, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is depicted in Figure 1. Beginning with the KMIDS context, King Mongkut's International Demonstration School (KMIDS) must prepare for ACS WASC initial accreditation on the six categories identified in the ACS WASC initial visit criteria framework. Data were collected through document reviews, observations, and interviews from ACS WASC accreditation preparation stakeholders (comprised of school administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators, and teachers). The researchers then applied the systematic design of grounded theory (consisting of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding respectively) to interpret the

gathered data and then inductively identify the challenges of KMIDS in preparing for ACS WASC accreditation (Bryman & Bell, 2011).



Literature Review

Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association for Schools and Colleges (ACS WASC). Accreditation is a voluntary and ongoing process of quality assurance that schools are assessed in what level and how they accomplish their established philosophy, goals, objectives, quality of curriculum and instruction that have impacts on student learning. The main purpose of accreditation is for schools' progress and improvement, by helping them identify their own strengths and areas for development. The Accrediting Commission for Schools, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (ACS WASC) is a world-renowned accrediting agency and one of the six regional accrediting agencies in the United States. ACS WASC provides services to schools located in California, Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Fiji, Asia, and other parts of the world (ACS WASC, 2017). ACS WASC has been working with international schools in Thailand, especially American schools. KMIDS Board of Directors resolved that the school will be affiliated and accredited by ACS WASC. For a newly-established international school as such KMIDS, ACS WASC has a set of guidelines called "ACS WASC initial visit criteria framework", that specially provides details towards action steps to take, as well as six research-based categories with descriptive indicators that the school is required to respond to: (1) organization for student learning; (2) curriculum, instruction and assessment; (3) support for student personal and academic growth; (4) resource management and development; (5) ONESQA standards for Thai language and Thai studies; and (6) boarding program.

King Mongkut's International Demonstration School (KMIDS). King Mongkut's International Demonstration School (KMIDS) is a secondary international demonstration school affiliated with King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, Ladkrabang (KMITL). The school was founded in 2016, aiming to foster students as masters of innovation. KMIDS boasts about being the first international school in Thailand specializing in science fields. As a demonstration school, the mission to the society is modeling the best practices of teaching and learning by conducting research in relation to the school's purpose. KMIDS has a unique curriculum vision and operation, the curriculum is developed by aligning learning content standards from both American and Thai curriculum. However, the school is seeking accreditation from ACS WASC and planning to receive the accreditation status in 2020 or before its first graduation. In order to accomplish this purpose, many KMIDS stakeholders have been involved by the school administrators in the accreditation preparation process since the academic year 2017-18. The first

step was to set up working groups, oriented around ACS WASC initial visit criteria framework. Each working group has a chairperson who leads, guides, and facilitates work among the members. The preparation period, from August 2017 to December 2019, is critical for KMIDS administrators, school supervisor, ACS WASC coordinators, and teachers to succeed in having the school accredited.

Methodology/Procedure

Population and sample. The population for interview in this study consisted of four groups of people: two school administrators, one school supervisor, two ACS WASC coordinators and 25 teachers (from the six working groups). A population sampling was considered regarding two school administrators, a school supervisor and two ACS WASC coordinators. For teachers, a purposive sampling was considered, in order to examine an exceptional case or the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Two teachers from each of six working groups were selected for the interviews. The selection criterion was that teachers who had more years of experiences at KMIDS than other teachers in the same working group were the first priority.

Research instruments. Research instruments of this study consisted of school documents, interview protocols, and observation filed notes. The researchers began the data collection process by reviewing relevant documents of KMIDS in preparing for ACS WASC accreditation, as well as the self-study reports of other schools that underwent accreditation, in order to help build the conceptual framework and the interview questions. While interviewing participants, working group meetings' observations were also conducted at the same time period of data collection.

Validation of data. In order to check whether data collected from participants were accurate or not, two typical techniques were implemented in this process: member-checking and triangulation (Creswell, 2012). For member-checking, the researchers went back to each participant with the transcript to check its accuracy and make changes where appropriate. For triangulation, the researchers sought to identify consistent themes among document review notes, interview transcriptions, and observation field notes altogether, in order to double check if the collected data were corresponding to one another.

Data analysis. In order to analyze the collected data in this study, the systematic design of grounded theory was applied. In this study, the researchers did not merely construct the new theories from his interpretations of raw data (collected from document reviews, participant interviews, and

observations), but also considered the research-based theory, ACS WASC initial visit criteria framework, and linked the emerging themes and sub-themes to the categories from ACS WASC framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this case, the selection of core, axial categories (i.e., the six categories of ACS WASC initial visit framework) was done deductively, before the coding process.

The systematic design involved three steps of analysis. In the first step, open coding, the researcher used the written notes, including the summary of document review notes, interview transcripts and observation field notes, to conceptualize all data line by line. Initially, everything was coded to discover the core phenomenon being studied, yielding many challenges. After that, the researchers compared all concepts, went back and forth to merge or modify those concepts and build up theories arising along the way. This step was done inductively, regardless of the ACS WASC initial visit framework. In the axial coding step, the researchers linked the concepts into the related category, oriented around the six categories of the ACS WASC initial visit framework. In the final step, the selective coding, the researchers wrote theories from the interrelationships of the concepts from the axial coding. This process involved integrating and refining the theories, by writing up the storyline and explaining them with coherent language. Therefore, the two final coding steps were regarded as both deductive and inductive.

Findings

The six findings in relation to six sub-research objectives are presented as follows.

Sub-Research Objective 1

Challenges in relation to organization for student learning were divided into four main themes and eight sub-themes as follows.

1. Administration
 - 1.1. School boards
 - 1.2. Organizational structure
2. Staff
 - 2.1. Staff qualifications
 - 2.2. Staff training and development
 - 2.3. Staff diversity
3. Type of school
 - 3.1. Demonstration school
 - 3.2. Science school
4. Affiliation with KMITL

- 4.1. Being under Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), Thailand
- 4.2. KMITL protocol and guidelines

Sub-Research Objective 2

Challenges in relation to curriculum, instruction and assessment were divided into two main themes and six sub-themes as follows.

- 1. Curriculum.
 - 1.1. Hybrid curriculum.
 - 1.2. Stakeholders' understanding of curriculum.
 - 1.3. Connection between learner outcomes and curriculum standards.
- 2. Instruction.
 - 2.1. English proficiency of students.
 - 2.2. Professional learning community for teachers.
 - 2.3. Courses instructed by KMITL professors.

Sub-Research Objective 3

Challenges in relation to support for student personal and academic growth were divided into two main themes and two sub-themes as follows.

- 1. University admission counselling.
- 2. Community involvement.
 - 2.1. Language communication.
 - 2.2. Parents' involvement for school improvement process.

Sub-Research Objective 4

Challenges in relation to resource management and development were divided into one main theme and two sub-themes as follows.

- 1. Resources.
 - 1.1. Facilities.
 - 1.2. Resources planning.

Sub-Research Objective 5

Challenges in relation to ONESQA standards for Thai language and Thai studies were divided into two main themes and four sub-themes as follows.

- 1. Thai curriculum and instruction.
 - 1.1. Thai curriculum.
 - 1.2. Thai language instruction and learning assessment.
- 2. Requirements from Thai Ministry of Education (MOE) and Office of National Educational Standards and Quality Assessment

(ONESQA).

2.1. ONESQA indicators.

2.2. Studying time requirement.

Sub-Research Objective 6

Challenges in relation to boarding program were divided into three main themes as follows.

1. KMITL dormitory facilities.
2. Qualifications of dormitory staff.
3. Student well-being and healthcare.

Discussion

The challenges of KMIDS in preparing for ACS WASC accreditation were classified into six categories, being oriented around the ACS WASC initial visit criteria framework. The researchers related the challenge findings to the self-study reports of other schools that underwent accreditation, and pointed out the key challenges that are unique to KMIDS as presented below.

Challenges in Relation to Organization for Student Learning

The first challenge category is administration. The leadership team and teachers feel that the body of KMIDS boards consist of university people who might not fully understand K-12 education and that probably results in disconnection between those boards and the real working people. This result is similar to the Self-Study Report of International School of Bangkok (2013), stating their further administration challenges in the areas of growth that the school administration should improve communication lines to keep faculty up-to-date of the most recent research, development and planning carried out at the school.

Since KMIDS is the special school and one of its kind in Thailand, the leadership mentioned that finding the suitable teaching staff is probably difficult. In addition, teachers think that the next step for KMIDS is to provide specialized, in-depth and more targeted trainings or professional development for teachers. This finding is similar to the International School of Bangkok (2013), the school should pursue ways for greater involvement from teachers in deciding learning goals and professional development programs.

Challenges in Relation to Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

The two main points addressed by the participants were curriculum and instruction. KMIDS curriculum is unique in style and management. The content standards were aligned from two sources: Thai and USA standards. A

distinguished response was from the school supervisor, demonstrating her viewpoint that having this special type of curriculum is quite rare because the school team has to do a lot more work such as standard alignment, supervising system, quality control system, etc. The result is similar to what International School of Bangkok (2013) addressed in its self-study report as their areas of growth, stating that school should find ways to gather input from teachers for curriculum review and continue to promote teachers' concepts and ability to implement the intended curriculum.

Regarding instruction, the leadership team and teachers discussed students' English proficiency as a critical point. Some teachers also added that English proficiency has greatly resulted in their students' overall performance in their class. This result is similar to what Seoul International School (2015) stated as areas of growth in its self-study report, saying that the school should offer additional support for underperforming students and English as a second language students.

When looking at teacher side, professional learning community (PLC) is another challenge for the quality improvement. This finding is the same as what Duxbury High School (2012) addressed their areas of growth in the self-study report that the school should provide sufficient common planning time for teachers to engage in cross-disciplinary collaboration. Similarly, Seoul International School (2015) also found that the common time is one of their areas of growth to further develop, by stating that collaboration time for teacher common planning and data analysis should be added especially in high school level.

Challenges in Relation to Support for Student Personal and Academic Growth

The two main challenges are counselling and community involvement. The majority of students at KMIDS would like to continue their undergraduate level in Thai universities, especially KMITL. The challenge is for the school counselor, who is American, to understand the Thai university system, that is different from that of American universities. There are also some KMIDS students who want to study abroad, so there is a challenge in balancing counseling workshops for students and revealing this work to ACS WASC visiting committee for accreditation.

Regarding parents' engagement, the idea is shared by a teacher in Working Group C that the next challenging step is to have more of parents' sessions to better improve home-school collaboration. This result is similar to the areas of growth in the self-study report addressed by two schools: Norwell High

School (2015) and Seoul International School (2015), stating that the schools should engage community to communicate and review their philosophy, mission, and schoolwide learner outcomes.

Challenges in Relation to Resource Management and Development

Even though KMIDS is operating in KMITL campus and sharing all facilities with KMITL, accessing to those KMITL sport complex requires KMIDS to do paperwork and travelling to the sport complex may be time-consuming. Due to the facility administration as mentioned, this challenge finding is unique only for KMIDS and may not be able to generalize to other schools.

For resource planning, a challenge for KMIDS is to build a school action plan in response to school philosophy, mission and learner outcomes. The challenging part is addressing all strategies that include areas such as marketing and curriculum and instruction, with resource allocation that directly suits the school distinctive points.

Challenges in Relation to ONESQA Standards for Thai Language and Thai Studies

Thai curriculum and instruction and ONESQA's and Thai Ministry of Education's requirements were the two main challenges. Thai teachers stressed that curriculum and instruction as their number one challenge. For KMIDS, the challenge is to brainstorm the ideas from Thai teachers and make the Thai curriculum that fits students' level and nature the most. One teacher added that the challenge for him is to make Thai teachers at KMIDS be aware of school's mission and helps students to accomplish scientific, innovative and creative thinking. In terms of instruction and assessment, a huge gap between Thai students who came from different backgrounds matter.

Another challenge is the Thai studies requirements for international schools from ONESQA and Thai Ministry of Education. First, ONESQA indicators. One teacher demonstrates that ONESQA accrediting indicators and Thai content standards from the Ministry of Education examine different issue. While the ONESQA indicators look for language acquisition and literacy, Thai content standards emphasizes in Thai literature or Thai grammar. Second, Thai studies time from Thai Ministry of Education that requires Thai national students to be scheduled Thai class at least 50 minutes on every school day. They think that the policy is difficult to abide by because each school has different schedule management, style and emphasis.

Challenges in Relation to Boarding Program

Three main points were discovered: facilities, dormitory staff and students' well-being. For facilities, boarding program is encountering the same issue as resource management working group since all dormitory facilities are owned by KMITL, KMIDS students has limited access to them.

Dormitory staff's qualifications become a challenge for boarding program working group, especially in language communication and experiences with children. For the language, English is the issue for some staff when getting into specific topics and it is probably standing in the way of communication between staff when critical points are discussed. Also, the staff skills in dealing with children is necessary since those children are in between 13 to 17 years-old.

The final challenge related to boarding program is students' safeguard and well-being. However, since KMIDS is sharing the dormitory with KMITL, the school has to work under limitations. The dormitory teachers are concerned about three things: the dormitory is surrounded by a public area; the dormitory is quite far away from the hospital; and there are limited options for students to have proper meals for dinner.

Recommendations

There are some recommendations for KMIDS in preparing towards ACS WASC initial accreditation as follows.

Regarding organization for student learning, the school should work with KMITL to allow KMIDS to be more autonomous because K-12 school education is different from higher education. As a demonstration school, the school should have a clear vision and mission of what to accomplish in addition to what other international schools do. Staff-development-wise, the school should encourage staff to create their own Individual Development Plan (IDP).

Regarding curriculum, the school should develop the written curriculum policies or guidelines to aid understanding of all school stakeholders. For instruction, the school should address English proficiency of students in the schoolwide action plan. In terms of learning assessment, the school should emphasize the importance of using various formative assessments to promote student learning.

Regarding support for student personal and academic growth, the school should have at least one Thai staff to help foreign counsellor with the Thai

university admission system and develop a calendar addressing more parent sessions in various topics.

Regarding resource management and development, the school should discuss with KMITL to synchronize the systems and develop a strategic plan by brainstorming relevant staff to invent the protocols and guidelines to reduce paperwork and help the school to move forward more rapidly.

Regarding ONESQA standards for Thai language and Thai studies, Thai teachers should develop Thai language and Thai social studies curriculum that help the majority of students to grow as well as differentiated instructions.

Regarding boarding program, the school leadership should have professional development or job-relevant workshops for dormitory staff who still need trainings and take prompt action to the problems relevant to student well-being and safeguarding.

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