Metaphor Salience in Thai Higher Education:
A Cognitive Linguistics Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the prevalence of metaphors in Thai higher education discourse from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Despite numerous attempts for reform, Thailand's education system continues to face societal and structural challenges, including persistent reliance on rote learning and ineffective policy implementation. Utilising Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), this research analyses the metaphorical language used in the philosophy, vision, mission, and goal statements of 164 Thai higher education institutions. The findings revealed a dominant use of "factory", "consumerism", and "construction" metaphors, reflecting perceptions of education as a mechanised process and commodified service. These metaphors influence educational practices and policies by emphasising efficiency and market-driven values over critical thinking and creativity. This evidence provides support for reframing education discourse in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). The study suggests that the metaphors employed in higher education should be reconsidered to promote a more student-focused approach that prioritises equity, creativity, and holistic development.

Keywords: Metaphor; Thai Higher Education; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Cognitive Linguistics; Educational Policy; Sustainable Development Goal

INTRODUCTION

Education in Thailand has long endured societal and structural challenges, even though numerous attempts to reform have persisted. One factor behind these shortcomings is the lack of active participation from key stakeholders, which has hindered effective policy implementation (Satienchayakorn, 2022). Thailand's PISA 2022 results remain below OECD averages across mathematics, reading, and science, with persistent equity gaps; pandemic-era reviews also highlight uneven digital access and variable readiness for hybrid learning; and international monitoring points to ongoing constraints in the wider academic environment that shape higher-education practice. While Thailand 4.0 aimed at cultivating a knowledge-based economy, it has encountered difficulties in solving systemic weaknesses inside higher education institutions (Scott & Guan, 2023)**.**

In addition, the National Education Plan (2017–2036) aims to move learning toward focusing on skills and innovation. Governance fragmentation and centralised decision-making delay the implementation across institutions (OECD, 2025). Under the pressures of these issues, it is important to evaluate the language that is employed in policy and institutional discourse. This is because the language not only reflects but also defines how education is conceptualised. Conceptual metaphors serve as effective frameworks that draw attention to some aspects of education while hiding others, affecting attitudes, expectations, and policy strategies. This study aims to explore the nature of Thai education through the metaphor to understand the wider educational landscape of the nation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual metaphor is a cognitive mechanism that enables people to understand abstract concepts through more concrete and familiar experiences. Metaphors are a systematic mapping between two domains, and they project selected features from the source domain onto the target (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In doing so, conceptual metaphors reveal some aspects of reality while hiding others, altering how people perceive, evaluate, and behave towards issues. The metaphors echo the interconnected structure of language, thought, and perception with the capacity to reframe understanding and shape attitudes toward social and educational concerns (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). In educational discourse, policy framing significantly impacts the educational landscape, demonstrating the metaphor's ability to reshape educational structures and influence policy decisions. These functions of metaphors within education can be better understood through Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Metaphors can explain complex ideas by using concrete evidence to explain abstract ideas. This is the metaphorical mapping involving the cognitive process of transferring concepts from a source domain to a target domain, thereby facilitating a deeper comprehension of new ideas. This process is known as "metaphor framing", shaping people's perceptions and decisions. For instance, the study of the framing effect has shown that framing a crime as "a beast" versus "a virus" produces interesting results. Both framings have influenced people to have different public perceptions and policy preferences (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). In another realm, Al Tameemi et al. (2024) show that the health agencies employ war metaphors to enhance support for certain framing mechanisms among audiences.

Metaphors are widely recognised for their descriptive abilities, but within education, they exhibit a significant normative function in shaping perception. There is ample evidence in educational research that highlights the influence of metaphors. Inbar (1991) notes that the connection between metaphors and educational policies postulates that the power of metaphors not only impacts but also brings about innovative policies and can be used as a planning tool in the field of education to effectively address the educational transformation and the formulation of policy. In addition, Cook-Sather (2003) posited that the role of metaphors is in transforming students into active learners by questioning and reformulating conventional educational frameworks and policies. These studies, therefore, highlight their significant contribution to the formation of educational environments. Building on this perspective, Ahmad and Abd Samad (2018) demonstrate that metaphors such as "mother", "knowledge giver", "law enforcer", and "facilitator" shape the professional identities of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) teachers, highlighting their influence on education.

Metaphorical framing guides communication and interpretation (Entman, 1993). McCandless et al. (2025) analyse the Australian government's Strong Beginnings policy, and the use of official metaphors such as "teachers as saviours" and "compliant victims" contradicts the self-perceptions of early-career educators, thus constraining the efficacy of the programme. Similarly, Pérez-Hernández and Pérez-Sobrino (2024) state that contrasting metaphors for educational methods are teaching as "knowledge-transfer" and "knowledge-construction." These shaped parents' expectations of learning outcomes. On the other hand, the expectations contrasted with the performance data gathered from students. This outcome illustrates that, without evidence, metaphorical frames risk distorting understanding rather than clarifying. Moving onto higher education, Kinchin (2022) argued for the need to change dominant metaphors to an ecological root metaphor in order to shift the frames that shape educational policy and practice. In the Thai context, Wongthai (2022) observed that in Thailand's higher education discourse, graduates are framed as

"products," which redirects focus from educational quality to output quantity. The literature reviews have disclosed the benefits of metaphors used in educational systems, but conversely, metaphors can also expose underlying issues or challenges that have influenced policy formation and academic practice.

Since metaphors function as cognitive instruments that influence how stakeholders in higher education comprehend and engage with institutions and practices, analysing the metaphors employed in policy and institutional discourse can offer insight into educational concepts. Hence, this study examines metaphor salience in Thai higher education through universities' philosophy, vision, mission, and goal statements to uncover the underlying educational perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines the philosophy, vision, mission, and goal statements of higher education institutions in Thailand for the purpose of investigating metaphors used in their respective discourse. The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) has recognised 173 institutions in Thailand as higher education bodies (*Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI)*, n.d.). Thailand's higher education institutions can be grouped into seven categories. Public universities rely on government funding and are generally associated with research-intensive missions and academic prestige. Autonomous universities operate with greater administrative and financial independence, which gives them more flexibility in governance and tuition policies. Private universities typically design their curricula in response to labour market demands, reflecting their emphasis on employability and professional skills. While Rajabhat universities play a key role in serving regional and community needs, Rajamangala universities focus more narrowly on vocational and technical education. Specialised institutions focus on particular fields such as medicine, engineering, or the arts. In addition, community colleges provide mainly two-year associate degree programmes and are designed to meet local educational and workforce needs, particularly in rural and provincial areas. However, community colleges were not included in the present study. This study focused on analysing the policy discourse of Thai higher education institutions from a philosophical standpoint. Consequently, the results exclusively reflect an understanding of education at the policy level. This study does not categorise comparisons among Thai higher education institutions, despite the diversity of the corpus. The scope was selected to obtain a comprehensive overview of metaphor salience in policy discourse at the national level. Recent national reviews explicitly acknowledge gaps between quality targets and actual learning outcomes and the need to align rhetoric with feasible, equitable delivery, underscoring why examining metaphor choice in university statements is timely.

The principal data for this research were obtained from the official websites of these institutions. The information pertaining to their philosophies, vision, mission, and goal statements was specifically collected, as they are generally available online. The statements were aggregated into a corpus, which served as a reliable source to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the metaphor prominent in Thai higher education.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the corpus, specific criteria were employed in the selection of universities. Two of the essential criteria included the institutions having to be active as of 2023 and offering at least a bachelor's degree programme; also, the philosophy, vision, mission, or goal statements had to be available online in order to be included in the corpus. Considering these criteria and taking into account a total of 173 universities, which were accredited

by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation, categorised as 'higher education' bodies, 164 institutions were selected for the purposes of this study and included in the composition of the corpus as detailed in Table 1. Other institutions were omitted due to a lack of their information available online.

TABLE 1. Composition of the Compiled Corpus

Statements	Words
Philosophy	4,455
Vision	4,921
Mission	16,123
Goals	7,871
Total	33,370

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of words across distinct statements. The total corpus is 33,370 words, consisting of 4,455 words of "Philosophy", 4,921 words of "Vision", 16,123 words of "Mission", and 7,871 words of "Goals", respectively. It should be noted that words establish a basis for the subsequent examination of conceptual metaphor within Thailand's compiled corpus of higher education discourse.

The analysis of the collected data was then organised into stages, starting with the identification of metaphorical linguistic expressions, and special attention was drawn to educational metaphors found in the compiled corpus through the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) and Steen's Metaphor Identification Procedure Vu University Amsterdam (MIPVU). This step consists of:

1. Reading and comprehension
2. Identification of lexical units
3. Context analysis
4. Basic meaning comparison
5. Metaphor classification

The above-mentioned step involved reading and comprehending the text, identifying lexical units, and analysing their context. The basic meaning of these lexical units was compared to determine any metaphorical usage. Once identified, these metaphors were categorised. Next, the found metaphors were analysed through conceptual mappings between source and target domains. The resulting conceptual metaphors were subsequently grouped according to shared characteristics, which facilitated the detection of broader patterns within the data. The study used these groups to identify the metaphor salience shaping education views in Thai higher education.

To ensure the reliability and consistency of the metaphor analysis, the approach underwent a validity assessment involving two analysts: a linguist and the researcher. Both analysts thoroughly examined 50 statements from different categories, which are 200 in total. The inter-rater agreement was measured using percentages to evaluate consensus. The agreement demonstrated high consistency and reliability in the identification process. To establish metaphor salience in the corpus, the analysis included calculating the frequency and percentage distribution of each identified metaphorical frame.

To assess metaphor salience, this study followed the approach of Kövecses et al. (2015), which involved evaluating the frequency of mappings, types, and tokens of the metaphors to indicate their significance. This method provides both the surface distribution and its deeper

conceptual mapping. Metaphor salience in this study, therefore, suggests conceptual importance in policy discourse, allowing us to understand how repeating metaphorical frames shape Thai higher education concepts and practices. Descriptive statistics, including aggregate values, were used to determine levels of importance, providing clarity on the extent of prominence. Higher aggregate values indicated a greater degree of significance. These metaphors demonstrate the widespread influence of metaphorical expressions in educational settings.

RESULTS

This research aims to uncover the salient metaphor that dominates the conceptualisation of Thai higher education. The corpus indicates that the domains of "factory," "construction," and "consumerism" dominate, together representing the majority of metaphor usage. The findings indicate a broad spectrum of metaphorical domains that mirror prevailing cognitive schemas and social views of education.

TABLE 2. The Distribution of Metaphorical Domains in Higher Education

Domain	Conceptual Metaphors	Frequencies	Percentage
Factory		337	36.08
	1. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE PRODUCERS	208	22.27
	2. STUDENTS ARE PRODUCTS	65	6.96
	3. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE RESOURCES	33	3.53
	4. KNOWLEDGE IS PRODUCT	13	1.39
	5. EDUCATION IS A PRODUCT	12	1.28
	6. STUDENTS ARE RESOURCES	4	0.43
	7. INSTRUCTORS ARE PRODUCTS	2	0.21
Construction		232	24.84
	8. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE BUILDERS	198	21.20
	9. EDUCATION IS BUILDING	34	3.64
Consumerism		173	18.52
	10. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE SERVICE INDUSTRY ORGANISATIONS	133	14.24
	11. EDUCATION IS A SERVICE	27	2.89
	12. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE BUSINESS ENTREPRENEURS	7	0.75
	13. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE BUSINESS ORGANISATIONS	5	0.54
	14. EDUCATION IS AN INVESTMENT	1	0.11
Engine		62	6.64
	15. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE ENGINES	27	2.89
	16. STUDENTS ARE ENGINES	26	2.78
	17. INSTRUCTORS ARE ENGINES	6	0.64
	18. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE A DRIVING FORCE	3	0.32
Artisan/ Creativity		44	4.71
	19. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE ARTISANS	32	3.43
	20. STUDENTS ARE ARTISANS	9	0.96
	21. INSTRUCTORS ARE ARTISANS	2	0.21
	22. ACADEMIC INSTITUTION IS A BLACKSMITH	1	0.11
Plants		29	3.10
	23. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE GARDENERS	12	1.28
	24. STUDENTS ARE PLANTS	9	0.96
	25. EDUCATION IS PLANT	8	0.86

Domain	Conceptual Metaphors	Frequencies	Percentage
Military/ Strategy		**19**	**2.03**
	26. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE COMBAT UNITS	19	2.03
Knowledge/Wisdom		14	1.50
	27. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE DEPOSITORIES OF WISDOM	11	1.18
	28. EDUCATION IS LIGHT	1	0.11
	29. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS SHELTERS	1	0.11
	30. EDUCATION IS HEART	1	0.11
Exploration/ Discovery		13	1.39
	31. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE EXPLORERS	12	1.28
	32. EDUCATION IS EXPLORATION	1	0.11
Change/ Influence		11	1.18
	33. ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE CHANGE AGENTS	10	1.07
	34. EDUCATION IS A CHANGE AGENT	1	0.11
	Total	934	100.00

The corpus yielded 934 linguistic expressions that illustrated the metaphorical conceptualisation of higher education. The table lists all the conceptual metaphors identified in the corpus, which categorise various metaphors relating to consumerism, engines, factories, construction, artisanship, military strategy, exploration, change, plants, and knowledge/wisdom. The most frequently occurring conceptual metaphor is [ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE PRODUCERS], found 208 times, making up 22.27% of all instances. Following this, [ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE BUILDERS] appears 198 times, 21.20%. [ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE SERVICE INDUSTRY ORGANISATIONS] is also common, with 133 times, accounting for 14.24%. Other notable metaphors include [STUDENTS ARE PRODUCTS] (65 times, 6.96%). These conceptual metaphors seem to suggest a strong conceptualisation of the institutions' roles in shaping a student.

The data reveal different conceptual metaphors used in educational discourse in higher education in Thailand. Notably, when examining the concept of a student, the metaphor [STUDENTS ARE PRODUCTS] appears frequently, with 65 instances, accounting for 6.96% of the total metaphors identified. This is significantly higher compared to other metaphors for students, such as [STUDENTS ARE PLANTS] (9 instances, 0.96%) and [STUDENTS ARE ENGINES] (26 instances, 2.78%).

When examining metaphors for academic institutions, [ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE PRODUCERS] leads with 208 instances, representing 22.27% of the total metaphors, followed closely by [ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE BUILDERS] with 198 instances (21.20%) and [ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE ENGINES] (27 instances, 2.89%). These highlight the view of educational institutions as both service providers and driving forces of education.

In contrast, conceptual metaphors relating to instructors were less frequent, with [INSTRUCTORS ARE ENGINES] appearing 6 times (0.66%) and [INSTRUCTORS ARE ARTISANS] only 2 times (0.22%). Other notable metaphors depicting education itself include [EDUCATION IS BUILDING] (34 instances, 3.64%) and [EDUCATION IS A SERVICE] (27 instances, 2.89%). The wide distribution of metaphors underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of perceptions regarding education in Thailand.

Overall, the distribution emphasises productivity and construction in how academic institutions are conceptualised. This suggests a dominant narrative around the roles and functions of educational entities within the higher education system.

After the conceptual metaphors were found, they were grouped into domains, as shown in Table 3. The table lists all the domains of conceptual metaphors identified from the corpus to show the level of salience. The metaphor salience illustrates how higher education is conceptualised through conceptual metaphors.

TABLE 3. Metaphor Salience Across Domains

	Domain of metaphors	Tokens	Percentage	Mapping	Percentage	Types	Percentage	Aggregate
1.	Factory	337	36	7	21	12	20	77
2.	Consumerism	173	19	5	15	12	20	54
3.	Construction	232	25	2	6	5	8	39
4.	Engine	62	7	4	12	10	17	35
5.	Artisan/Creativity	44	5	4	12	3	5	22
6.	Plants	29	3	3	9	4	7	19
7.	Knowledge/Wisdom	14	1	4	12	3	5	18
8.	Change/Influence	11	1	2	6	4	7	14
9.	Military/Strategy	19	2	1	3	5	8	13
10.	Exploration/Discovery	13	1	2	6	1	2	9
	Total	934	100	34	100	59	100	300

According to Table 3, the three most salient conceptual metaphors, precisely in the present context, with the source domain of education ranked according to metaphorical salience, are Factory, Consumerism, and Construction.

The most salient metaphors are found in the "factory" domain, with 77, the highest aggregate score among the identified metaphors, with its prominence largely stemming from mission statements driven by policy-oriented mission statements. Corpus data collected in this study further support the centrality of the factory metaphor in educational discourse. Of the total 33,370 words analysed, the "Mission" statements alone accounted for 16,123 words, which is nearly half of the total corpus. Mission statements are the most detailed and directive sections, making them a rich source for metaphorical expressions. Because these missions are mandated, universities are compelled to clearly list them, reinforcing the industrial logic behind educational evaluation. In Thai higher education, the factory is commonly used to describe education as a production-oriented process. Universities are frequently characterised as "producing" graduates with particular abilities and qualities to satisfy demands. For example, Rangsit University uses "producing" to emphasise the factory-like approach in preparing graduates for predetermined societal roles as stated in, "Rangsit University is committed *to producing graduates* with the skills to serve society" (มหาวิทยาลัยรังสิต มีความมุ่งมั่นที่จะผลิตบัณฑิต ให้มีทักษะที่จะออกไปรับใช้สังคม) (*Rangsit University*, n.d.). This metaphorical expression illustrates the university as a manufacturing facility where students are moulded to satisfy market needs.

Similarly, the Merchant Marine Training Centre is referred to as a "source" for "producing naval officers," as stated in "Merchant Marine Training Centre: A *source producing* naval officers, the cornerstone of the Navy" (ศูนย์ฝึกพาณิชย์นาวี: *แหล่งผลิตนายเรือ อันเป็นรากแก้วของกองทัพเรือ*) (*Merchant Marine Training Centre*, n.d.). The institution depicts itself as a factory that manufactures officers, reinforcing the notion that education is primarily about efficiency and control.

Another example comes from the Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy. The factory domain is evident in military institutions. The Commandant of Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy oversees the "*production:* of commissioned officers for the Air Force (ผู้บัญชาการโรงเรียนนายเรืออากาศนวมินทกษัตริยาธิราช (ผบ.รร.นนก.) เป็นผู้บังคับบัญชารับผิดชอบ เพื่อให้ภารกิจในการผลิตนายทหารสัญญาบัตรของกองทัพอากาศ (ทอ.) บรรลุผลโดยสมบูรณ์) (*Navaminda Kasatriyadhiraj Royal Air Force Academy*, n.d.), implying that the academy functions like a factory, systematically preparing officers for service.

Collectively, these examples illustrate how the metaphor conceptualises education as a process centred around efficiency, control, and measurable outcomes. By using the factory metaphor, educational institutions are metaphorically likened to production facilities that "manufacture" individuals for predefined societal roles. This aligns with the input-output schema inherent in the metaphor, where students are treated as raw materials being "developed" or "shaped" into final products, as seen in the example. From the perspective of conceptual metaphor theory, which suggests that we understand abstract concepts through more concrete experiences, the metaphor of education as a "factory" shapes how we think about and engage with learning institutions. In this case, education is conceptualised as a production process, where students are metaphorically framed as "products" being "produced" by institutions.

"Consumerism" is ranked the second most salient metaphor used in higher education discourse, accounting for 54 aggregates, reflecting how education is conceptualised. The consumerism metaphors reflect the shift toward financial self-sufficiency and student-centred competitiveness following Thai government reforms in the early 2000s. The policy encouraged all public universities to become financially self-sufficient and prepare for autonomy (Scott & Guan, 2023). These corporatisation-like measures cut public funds and expanded institutional control over tuition, budgets, and staffing.

In this context, consumerism metaphors are embedded in discourse related to satisfaction, branding, market share, and institutional competitiveness. This dominance underscores the increasing perception of education as a service-based and transactional process. This domain features metaphors like "ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE SERVICE INDUSTRY ORGANISATIONS" and "EDUCATION IS A SERVICE". The institutions are as service providers catering to the needs of students.

The metaphor applied to Kalasin University characterises "ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE BUSINESS ENTREPRENEURS," indicating that it "delivers vocational education and bachelor's degree programmes to address *labour market needs* and national development direction" (จัดการศึกษาทางด้านวิชาชีพทั้งระดับต่ำกว่าปริญญาและระดับปริญญา เพื่อตอบสนอง*ความต้องการตลาดแรงงานและทิศทางการพัฒนาประเทศ*) (*Kalasin University*, n.d.). The "market need" embodies education as being connected with business operations, offering a service targeted to meet labour market demands consistent with the basis of consumerism.

Valaya Alongkorn Rajabhat University also exemplifies the metaphor of "collaboration with external stakeholders to achieve community development" (เกิด*ความร่วมมือกับหุ้นส่วน*ทางสังคมในการพัฒนาชุมชน ท้องถิ่น) (*Valaya Alongkorn Rajabhat University*, n.d.). In this context, this "collaboration" and "shareholders" position the university as a company engaged in a commercial-like relationship between the institution and its community collaborators. The conceptual metaphor demonstrates that education is increasingly conceptualised as a transactional activity and partnership for mutual benefits.

Another example of consumerism is from Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The university is "committed *to investing* in education and research in fields of expertise that can be applied to create benefits" (มุ่งมั่นใน*การลงทุน*ทางการศึกษาวิจัยในศาสตร์ที่เป็นเอตทัคคะ ที่สามารถนำไปใช้ให้เกิดผลประโยชน์ได้) (*Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University*, n.d.). It embodies the metaphor "EDUCATION IS INVESTMENT." "Investing" depicts education as a financial investment in which resources are invested with future returns. This conceptual metaphor is not only seen as a service but also as an investment to secure future success. It posits that businesses invest in ventures for financial returns, and students invest in education to gain benefits.

In these metaphors, academic institutions are depicted through the lens of consumerism, wherein knowledge, education, and services are commodified and exchanged as consumer products. The institutions are conceptualised as enterprises or service providers that address market demands (e.g., employment opportunities, societal requirements) and allocate resources for future investments (e.g., research, community advancement). This shifts the function of universities from mainly instructional institutions to commercial enterprises with strategic goals akin to corporations in the business sector.

The third most salient is "construction," comprising 39 aggregates of the metaphors. Prevalent metaphors in this domain encompass [ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS ARE BUILDERS] and [EDUCATION IS BUILDING], wherein education is perceived as a construction process. This elucidates our understanding of abstract notions like schooling through tangible metaphors such as building and construction. This perspective underscores the importance of a solid educational foundation and the gradual strengthening of student competencies, similar to the orderly construction of a building layer by layer.

At Phramongkutklao College of Medicine, this metaphor is stated in its mission to "*build* a new generation of leaders for global health" (มุ่ง*สร้าง*ผู้นำรุ่นใหม่เพื่อสุขภาพโลก) (*Phramongkutklao College of Medicine*, n.d.). The word "build" refers to the institution's role in helping its students to develop their knowledge and leadership skills. Equivalent to the construction of a structure, the educational process is seen as the process of assembling the necessary components for future professionals.

In addition, the metaphor is also evident in Mae Fah Luang University's mission, which is "to build knowledge, quality, morality, and preserve nature" (*สร้าง*คน *สร้าง*ความรู้ *สร้าง*คุณภาพ *สร้าง*คุณธรรม และอนุรักษ์ธรรมชาติ) (*Mae Fah Luang University*, n.d.). Its mission embodies the metaphor "EDUCATION IS BUILDING." The term "build" depicts education as the process of building a structure. The university commits to developing well-rounded individuals with knowledge and moral values, which are structured similarly to the precision, planning, time, and intention required in construction.

To further illustrate, the example from Surat Thani Rajabhat University emphasises that "EDUCATION IS BUILDING" as seen in "strengthening and building upon the knowledge, understanding of values, awareness, and pride in Thai culture" (เสริม*สร้าง*ความรู้ ความเข้าใจในคุณค่า ความสำนึกและความภูมิใจในวัฒนธรรมไทย) (*Surat Thani Rajabhat University*, n.d.). Here, the term "strengthening and building upon" positions education as a process of strengthening and building upon the existing structure. In the same way, education is where knowledge and values can be deepened, reinforced, and evolved to enhance students' intellectual identity and pride.

Positioning Thai higher education through construction metaphors reveals that education is a structured, intentional process of gradual development aiming to foster students' competencies, similar to the construction process. Conceptually, universities build knowledge, character, and professional skills, transforming students into individuals capable of contributing to society's intellect, morals, and culture. In addition, the metaphor suggests the importance of a solid educational foundation with scaffolding to support the ongoing development of student abilities, akin to constructing a building step by step.

In summary, examining conceptual metaphors in Thai higher education reveals that education shows how academic institutions are perceived in terms of production, consumerism, and construction. The metaphors shed light on the variations of the education process and institutions as conceptualised within our society, illustrating their significant influence on attitudes and perceptions toward education.

DISCUSSION

The "factory", "consumerism", and "construction" metaphors are the salient metaphors used to conceptualise Thai higher education. When situated in a global context, the prevalence of consumerism metaphors in global higher education is extensive. In the United States, higher education institutions are frequently conceptualised through a metaphorical lens that perceives students as consumers and education as a commodity or service (Ramsey, 2022). Similarly, in Europe and Latin America, universities are frequently employed consumerism metaphors with a focus on competitiveness. In contrast, China employs plant, construction, and war metaphors, as shown in university commencement speeches (Zhao & Wongthai, 2024). Compared to Thai higher education, it adopts the global trend of the consumerism metaphor. Unlike many global contexts, Thai higher education blends construction and factory metaphors, with the factory metaphor prevailing as it conceptualises universities as sites for producing graduates to serve national development.

Despite the possibility of narrowing educational visions, the factory, consumerism, and construction metaphors contribute positively to Thai higher education through their alignment with national and institutional objectives. The Thai Qualifications Framework (TQF) defines transparent competency domains, intellectual and interpersonal skills, and curriculum outcomes that guide teaching and learning (OECD, 2025). Within this framework, the factory metaphor highlights efficiency and preparation for the workforce while the construction metaphor aligns with structured, scaffolded learning, emphasising knowledge-building and moral development. Further, the consumerism metaphor encourages responsiveness and innovation; empirical research shows that increased student satisfaction is directly linked to greater international competitiveness of Thai universities, spurred by initiatives like curriculum revisions and customised student services (Zhong et al., 2025).

These metaphors are also aligned with the broader industrial and market-oriented ideologies shaping the Thai higher education system. The industrial and market orientation entails standardisation reflecting an effort to establish uniform benchmarks, ensuring comparability and consistency across institutions. These parallels underscore the importance of standardisation, quantifiable outcomes, and an instrumental approach to education, as they reflect long-standing traditions that associate academic excellence with productivity and quantitative achievements. While these metaphorical lenses underscore efficiency, structure, and adaptability, their strengths

can have limitations. Metaphors may constrain the potential to cultivate critical, independent thinkers. As Fry and Bi (2013) highlight, while the 1999 National Education Act emphasises broader educational goals fostering innovation, it critiques the overemphasis on standardised, utilitarian outcomes, potentially undermining holistic societal contributions.

The "factory" metaphor evokes an industrial perspective on education, connecting academic institutions to factories and students to standardised products. Education is conceptualised as a controlled and efficient process to meet production requirements. The metaphors emphasising standardisation are consistent with practices in Thai educational discourse, such as curriculum implementation and standardised testing, which act as quality assurance. Ahmady et al. (2016) contend that these metaphors embody instrumental viewpoints on education, wherein the objective is frequently aligned with addressing societal and economic demands. Through the lens of this metaphor, Thai higher education institutions are perceived as mass manufacturers of graduates expected to occupy roles in the workforce and enhance national economic development. This perspective prioritises productivity and efficiency over creative or critical educational approaches.

Expanding on this point, the "factory" metaphor casts students as "products" under quality control. The metaphor implies a standardised approach that frequently prioritises measurable abilities over holistic development, which may unintentionally marginalise various measures of student success and constrain educational innovation (Mason, 2018). Consequently, the diversity of education is limited due to the overemphasis on factory-like processes, which risks marginalising non-standardised measures of student success. Furthermore, this metaphor aligns with Fry and Bi's (2013) criticism of Thailand's National Education Act of 1999 goals, which underscores a commitment to producing capable human resources for national development, emphasising human resource development over cultivating critical thinkers prepared for a more dynamic, equitable society. Yet, the exclusive focus on outcomes could compromise the educational mission of fostering critical, independent thinkers capable of contributing to a more dynamic and equitable society.

A further point to consider is that the factory, which frames institutions as production facilities and students as products with the goal of mass-producing graduates, metaphorically corresponds to the concept of marketisation in higher education. The universities are seen as manufacturers that produce students with customised skills to fulfil market demands. From this view, education is regarded as a service aimed at efficiency, standardisation, and output rather than fostering creativity, critical thinking, and individual development, which account for education goals. Davis et al. (2020) critique the limitations of the factory metaphor, asserting that although the metaphor carries historical significance, its emphasis on efficiency and standardisation overlooks fundamental educational objectives such as the cultivation of critical thinking, ethical development, and lifelong learning. This shows the need for transitioning away from the factory metaphor.

Another prominent metaphor within Thai higher education is "consumerism", which reflects the growing influence of a market-driven orientation on academic institutions. This metaphor portrays students as consumers and academic institutions as service providers, conveying excessive authority to students, who may view themselves as consumers authorised to request adjustments in educational "products". Privileging students above parents, potential employers, and taxpayers creates a power imbalance. Due to this dynamic, the traditional roles of knowledge acquisition and dissemination may be overshadowed by students' complaints or pleasure, which could lead to a change in classroom power and problems like grade inflation.

In addition, the "consumerism" metaphor highlights the commodification of education, raising concerns about its impact on the broader goals of learning. Norris (2020) emphasises the commercial element of this metaphor, depicting 'education as a service' and 'knowledge as a commodity.' This approach reformulates curricula to emphasise "marketable" subjects, frequently at the cost of the humanities and liberal arts, which are fundamental for critical thinking and societal responsibility. Institutions are forced to operate equivalently to corporations, emphasising competition, resource distribution, and prompt economic results. The objectives jeopardise the objective of education to promote intellectual development, critical analysis, and social accountability. This commercialisation undermines education's cooperative public service, as Schwartzman (2016) asserts that education should maximise opportunity and student potential rather than efficiency and profit.

As shown above, the "consumerism" metaphor reflects the increasing impact of market principles in education. Although it may improve employability and institutional competitiveness, it raises questions regarding the depth and purpose of learning, underscoring the necessity for a balanced approach that prioritises long-term social benefits with individual fulfilment.

Both "factory" and "consumerism" metaphors align with neoliberalism's emphasis on human capital development, where education is seen as a tool for equipping individuals with skills essential to the market. Neoliberalism has transformed education systems globally by framing them as competitive and market-driven. As an illustration, institutions are increasingly required to implement standardised testing and performance metrics to attract students and maintain reputations. This often narrows the curriculum, favouring marketable STEM fields while marginalising disciplines like the arts and humanities (Connell, 2013). Through market mechanisms, the privatisation of education has increased pressure to focus on profits, resulting in disparities in educational equality and outcomes. Moreover, Nordensvärd and Ketola (2019) note that neoliberalism develops hybrid student identities that combine consumerist and social democratic principles. This hybridisation illustrates the conflict between education's market-driven mission and its role in equity and citizenship. The perception of education as a private investment causes a decrease in public funding and shifts financial burdens for students. This focus often turns education into an exchange process where knowledge becomes a purchasable commodity. Metaphors also create significant pressure on teachers, who are increasingly treated as service providers responsible for achieving performance targets, often at the cost of their professional autonomy and creativity.

In contrast to the "factory" and "consumerism" metaphors, the "construction" metaphor offers a more constructive framework by likening education to the systematic building of knowledge and character. This metaphor emphasises the role of educational institutions as architects, designing and constructing a robust foundation for students' intellectual and personal growth. In this light, education is not simply about producing outputs but about constructing resilient, well-rounded individuals equipped to navigate a complex, evolving world.

"Construction" metaphors are critical in offering a comprehensive conceptual framework that corresponds with higher educational policies. These metaphors suggest that learning itself is a structure that requires solid "foundations" for cognitive and ethical growth. This metaphor emphasises the importance of constructing a base that supports not only learning but also lifelong growth and adaptability, in line with current educational philosophies that prioritise student autonomy and personal development (Wood, 2020). By depicting learning as a structure, the construction metaphor emphasises standardised procedures. That is, the notion of construction metaphor exhibits flexibility, offering adaptation and personalisation in education. This signifies

more holistic and student-centred practices in higher education, in which learning and teaching are built to promote autonomy and creativity. Nonetheless, the construction metaphor can also depict education as a static structure rather than an evolving process. That is possibly obscuring the dynamic aspect of learning. Integrating stability and adaptability in policy formulation may allow educational systems to address changing societal needs while preserving the core concepts that render the significance of higher education.

Subsequently, the construction metaphor in education policy influences the expectations and priorities of higher education in terms of stability and progress. This metaphor enables stakeholders to conceptualise higher education at a macro level. Moreover, this metaphor helps stakeholders to conceptualise the higher education system as a resilient construct that requires careful development and maintenance. This corresponds with Wood's (2020) assertion that educational environments facilitate learning and actively shape interactions and results, providing architecture as a policy tool in conveying institutional ideals and goals. Therefore, the construction metaphor promotes policies prioritising access, equity, and an ethical foundation, deemed vital for establishing a sustainable education system.

The metaphors employed to illustrate Thai higher education expose inherent conflicts between market-oriented ideology and overarching educational objectives, including the promotion of creativity, critical thinking, and comprehensive development. Notable metaphors such as factory, consumerism, and construction illustrate the dominant industrial, structural, and market-driven paradigms that influence the system. These metaphors are significantly shaped by neoliberalism, which has grown progressively ingrained in Thai educational policy. This approach jeopardises the educational mission by concentrating exclusively on economic production and neglecting the essential intellectual engagement and critical thinking that education ought to foster.

Uerpairojkit (2024) studies the impact of neoliberal policies on Thailand's educational scene, highlighting that the emphasis on efficiency and competition frequently eclipses the cultivation of autonomous, reflective thinkers. This aligns with the concept of consumerism, wherein education is treated as a commodity, and students are perceived as clients pursuing gratification through employability and immediate results. As Norris (2020) states, this view of education as a 'transaction' turns learning into a service, which takes away from its true value and moves attention away from long-term intellectual growth and service to society.

According to Imsa-ard et al. (2021), the issues experienced by pre-service teachers in Thailand are the result of a system that promotes efficiency and standardised outputs over personal growth and autonomy. Their research focuses on how pre-service teachers face stress, a lack of support, and limits as a result of inflexible expectations that value conformity over creativity and critical engagement during their teaching practicum. This is in line with Uerpairojkit's (2024) criticism of how neoliberal frameworks restrict students' and teachers' intellectual freedom and creativity by placing an excessive emphasis on market-driven objectives.

On the other hand, artisan, plant, and exploration metaphors coexist with factory, consumerism, and construction metaphors in Thai higher education discourse. These metaphors offer a more humanistic approach to education. Plant metaphors stress natural growth and nurturing, aligning with comprehensive development. The exploration metaphor views education as discovery and change, which promotes creativity and adaptability in a fast-changing global setting (Pérez-Hernández & Pérez-Sobrino, 2024). These alternative metaphors may enrich policy discourse and practice beyond mechanistic models.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the metaphorical salience in Thai higher education, such as "factory" and "consumerism," may not facilitate students' intellectual and holistic development. These metaphors often align with market-driven ideologies that prioritise efficiency, standardisation, and measurable outcomes. Although these qualities are significant, they may obscure vital aspects of education, including the cultivation of creativity, autonomous thought, and critical thinking. The Thai government should take more effective measures to include creativity in the educational system (Power, 2015). Uerpairojkit (2024) attacks how neoliberal changes diminish education to a transactional endeavour, emphasising immediate economic objectives at the expense of overarching educational ambitions. These market-oriented metaphors exhibit considerable constraints that need a reconsideration of their application in Thai higher education. By emphasising efficiency and standardised outcomes, these metaphors frequently obstruct the profound intellectual engagement necessary for students' comprehensive development. Wongthai (2022) similarly underscores the dangers of perceiving students as consumers and academic institutions as service providers, a viewpoint that threatens to devalue education instead of fostering a learning experience. Imsa-ard et al. (2021) further underscore the limitation of standardised approaches, particularly for pre-service teachers, revealing the necessity of shifting from inflexible, standardised standards to methodologies that promote creativity and critical engagement. These findings collectively indicate that a transformation in educational paradigms and practices is essential. A strategy that prioritises students and fosters innovation may enhance the cultivation of critical thinking, creativity, and enduring societal contributions, guaranteeing that education realises its transformative potential. Thus, this research suggests the need to reconsider the metaphors employed in higher education to enhance a more student-centred approach.

LIMITATION

It is important to note the limitations of this study, even if it identifies construction, consumerism, and industrial metaphors as dominating in Thai higher education discourse. First, the study is limited to textual analysis of mission, vision, philosophy, and goal statements. These policy-driven texts may fail to represent classroom reality and student and teacher experiences. Second, the salience of factory, consumerism, and construction metaphors reflects Thailand's policy environment and historical reforms and may not extend uniformly to other ASEAN or global contexts. Third, it does not compare metaphor use among Thai higher education institutions in terms of regional context, types of institutions, and size. All these factors have the potential to significantly impact metaphorical framing. To address these limitations, it is recommended for future research to do comparative research and to combine textual analysis with that of stakeholders and classroom practices and investigate intra-national institutional diversity.

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