

## Graduate Programs on Human Rights: Mahidol University

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**T**HE CENTER for Human Rights Studies and Social Development (CHRSD) was established in 1996 by Mahidol University with the aim of providing education and research opportunities in the area of human rights. The CHRSD runs an international Graduate Program in Human Rights, leading to a Masters of Human Rights, and a number of research and other activities. It also offers an International PhD course in Human Rights and Peace Studies, and a Masters of Human Rights and Development in Thai language.

The Masters of Human Rights international program is the longest running masters human rights program offered in Southeast Asia. It attracts a diverse student base from around the world, with students from over twenty countries having graduated or are currently completing their research.

### **Objectives and Programs**

The CHRSD aims to develop the ways and means by which human rights are transformed into social and political realities at the community, national and international levels. It does so primarily through educating human rights practitioners, but also through outreach programs to community and international organizations, and by conducting cutting edge research on issues of crucial importance to human rights.

In pursuit of these objectives, CHRSD implements three major programs:

### **1. Study Program**

The CHRSD is currently running three graduate study programs, namely:

- 1) MA in Human Rights (International Program)
- 2) PhD in Human Rights and Peace Studies (International Program)
- 3) MA in Human Rights and Development (Domestic Program, in Thai language)
- 4) Asia Pacific MA in Human Rights and Democracy (Regional Program).

### **2. Training Program**

CHRSD runs human rights training upon request to enhance academic human rights knowledge for practitioners in the region. From 2002-2006, it also ran the annual Southeast Asian Advanced Program on Human Rights and the Asian Thematic Training on Human Rights with the support from the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, Lund University, Sweden.

### **3. Research Program**

CHRSD supports research that contributes to the greater understanding and increasing reach of human rights to all levels and groups in society. Research supported by the program aims to both develop academic knowledge of critical concern to human rights, and provide practical applications of human rights activities in a wide diversity of fields.

### **4. Networking Program**

CHRSD is an active member of human rights networks of organizations from the grassroots level, to the national and international levels. It works with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government offices, other academic institutions and regional groups who are active in the field of human rights. It facilitates communication between students, researchers, academics, civil society and practitioners. It also works in cooperation with many organizations that share the same goals of promoting human rights and contributing to society.

## Academic Programs

CHRSD runs three different human rights graduate degree programs with a fourth under development, taking a multi-disciplinary approach to the subject. Unlike the majority of human rights degrees, which are offered by Law Faculties, students at the CHRSD are taught from a variety of social science viewpoints: political, social, cultural, and philosophical in addition to legal.

### International Masteral Program

The International Master of Arts (MA) in Human Rights program aims at producing graduates who are capable of applying human rights knowledge to their fields of work, be they academics, policymakers, human rights practitioners or activists. Graduates are expected to have acquired knowledge independently, a skill necessary for the advancement of academic studies and promotion of human rights in society. The program is committed to producing graduates who:

1. Have an excellent knowledge of human rights from an interdisciplinary perspective, and are knowledgeable about human rights situations relevant to their own experiences or specific interests
2. Are able to relate their knowledge of human rights with political, economic, social and cultural contexts
3. Are capable of utilizing human rights knowledge in their respective fields of work
4. Are socially aware and intend to work for the realization of human rights in society.

The program was approved by the Thai Ministry of University Affairs on 19 August 1998 and started in academic year 1999.

The program was revised in 2002, for the following reasons: the old curriculum did not support students in completing their research component, and many students were having difficulty finishing their thesis; the old curriculum was not considered coherent enough and attempted to cover too many divergent issues. The new curriculum is far more interdisciplinary, and many courses combine legal, social, and political aspects; the new curriculum also has a strengthened Asia focus. As most students come from an NGO or activist background, better balance between theory and practice was considered a need (for example through the addition of Practical Skills for Human Rights Protection; and Peace, Conflict Management and Human Rights).

The students of the international MA program have to have substantial professional work with NGOs. Some government officials and staff of national human rights institutions have also applied and been accepted. Until 2007, most applicants were from Southeast Asia, with growing applications from South Asia. Occasional applicants from East Asia (mainly Japan), and the USA have also been accepted. In the last couple of years (2008-2009), the program has begun receiving a small but significant number of students from Europe, and the Americas.

Given the fairly low number of applicants, promotion of the program is an essential area for exploration. Over the years there have also been some concerns about the readiness of some of the students for postgraduate studies, which is another reason that the pool of potential applicants needs to be widened. This will be key for program expansion and increase in the number of students accepted to the program in the future.

In 2009, the tenth year of operations for the international MA, the program received eight new students (the twelfth batch). These students reflect the diversity of the program itself, coming from a variety of backgrounds and places: Brazil, Bangladesh, Canada, Nepal, Philippines, Poland, Switzerland, and the US. Unfortunately, one student from Nepal withdrew from the program in the first month for personal reasons, and so the number of MA students was reduced to seven.

### **International PhD Program**

The International PhD in Human Rights and Peace Studies began in 2006 and is noted for its unique and innovative content, crossing disciplinary boundaries that reflect real life situations where distinctions between the human rights and peace are often unclear. The CHRSD takes the view that without respect for human rights there can be no peace, and that without peace there cannot be full enjoyment of human rights.

The program is also unique because it is the first inter-disciplinary PhD program in Asia, and one of only a few of this nature in the world. It develops human capacity in the region by training people from the region in advanced research techniques in human rights.

The objectives of the program are to produce graduates who:

1. Have thorough knowledge of theories and concepts of human rights and peace
2. Have high quality research skills and an ability to manage complex research projects

3. Are capable of applying their knowledge of human rights and peace, in a practical way, to real life situations.

After three years of development, the first batch of students was accepted in 2006. The program is designed for an average of five students per batch. But eleven students (four on scholarship positions) applied and were accepted as the first batch of students. To avoid having this number of students in the second batch, CHRSD employed a system of offering positions in the program in several rounds. This resulted in having four students for the second batch. The third batch has three students.

For the first batch, at the end of the coursework, eight students remained, as there were two dropouts from students who were working full time outside the program and could not manage the commitment.

A total of twenty students have enrolled in the PhD program so far. In its third year, the program accepted three new promising students from the USA., Norway, and Thailand. Despite the large number of applicants to the program, intake is kept to a small select group to ensure that they have the necessary guidance and resources needed.

### **Masteral Program for Thailand**

In response to a growing demand in Thailand for a graduate level academic program in human rights, CHRSD opened a masteral program for Thais. Many NGO workers and government officials dedicated to human rights work have been denied the opportunity to have graduate study on human rights due to lack of English language skills. The Thai language masters students are expected to have a broader reach into the Thai community than that of the English masters students.

The Thai MA program began accepting students in 2007. It is taught in Thai language and focuses on issues of specific relevance to Thailand. The program offers two different options for graduation (in addition to completion of the required coursework): 1. full MA thesis; or 2. smaller thematic paper with additional course work.

CHRSD accepted seventeen students for the first batch. The number went down to three students for the second batch due to a more rigorous selection procedure. Although all of seventeen students accepted in the first year were fully committed to the human rights discipline, many were unable to devote the time required for the rigorous requirements of an academic degree. As a result, the admissions committee decided to individually inter-

view promising applicants for the pool to ensure the candidate's full understanding of the commitment required to complete a full academic degree.

Efforts are being made to increase the pool of candidates for the third intake, with the hope that more suitable candidates can be found for the MA program. These efforts include increasing the publicity for the program, and widening the target audience, to result in a larger pool of potential candidates.

### **Asia Pacific Regional Masters in Human Rights and Democratization**

This is a new masteral program focusing on human rights and democratization and involves the collaboration of several universities in Asia and the Pacific. It is currently under development with funding from the European Commission. It aims to accept the first twenty students in 2010. The students will spend their first semester at the University of Sydney in Australia, and the second semester will be spent at any of the following universities: Mahidol University (CHRSD), Gadjadara University in Indonesia, University of Colombo in Sri Lanka, and Katmandu School of Law in Nepal.

### **Other Activities**

CHRSD initiated a number of projects that mobilize the academic institutions in Southeast Asia toward greater focus on human rights.

### **Southeast Asia Human Rights Studies Network**

CHRSD and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law jointly initiated the South East Asia Human Rights Studies Network (SEAHRS). Representatives from nine academic institutions in the subregion with human rights programs gathered in Bangkok on 9-10 October 2009 to discuss areas of common interest and the possibility of future joint activities, along with representatives from the ASEAN University Network (AUN). The topics under discussion in this first meeting included an overview of the human rights expertise in each of the network institutions; the current availability of graduate level human rights education in the Southeast Asia subregion and the gaps that need to be filled; and potential short and long term SEAHRS activities. There were seventeen participants from the following institutions: Chulalongkorn University, Mahasarakham University, Mahidol University (Thailand); Islamic University of Indonesia,

Universitas Indonesia (Indonesia); University of Malaya, Universiti of Sains Malaya (Malaysia); University of the Philippines (Philippines); Vietnam National University Hanoi (Vietnam); Raoul Wallenberg Institute (Sweden); and AUN. These academic institutions have all agreed to become members of SEAHRS.

The next SEAHRS meeting, to coincide with the AUN meeting in 2010, will discuss the plan of action, including division of responsibilities for an international conference, and structure and vision for the SEAHRS network.

### **Research on the Legal Framework of Migration**

In commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the research team at the CHRSD was one of the eight teams chosen to investigate contemporary challenges to the enjoyment of human rights. With funding from the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs (Government of Switzerland), the CHRSD team undertook research on the topic “Protection of People Outside their State: A Comprehensive Analysis,” using Southeast Asia as a case study.

The research was undertaken in two parts during the first half of 2009. The first component consisted of an analysis of the current legal and political framework for people outside of their own respective countries, focusing on the inter-relationships between refugees, victims of human trafficking, and migrant workers. The second component examined the role of organizations working in the field, their programs and activities, and their response (or its absence) to widespread human rights violations.

The research found that even though there existed a range of treaties in the legal framework to protect non-citizens, there were still specific groups of people left with little or no protection due to the “patchwork” nature of the current legal frameworks. A number of reasons caused the disjunction, complementarity and contradiction between the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Palermo Protocol (Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air) and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. The sector specific mandates and program areas lead to lack of dialogue between NGOs working in refugee, migrant worker, or counter trafficking fields; uneven responses by states resulted in considerable progress in certain areas (such as refugee protection) and a lack of progress in others (such as migrant worker protection).

### Conference

In October 2009 the CHRSD, in cooperation with the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, organized an international conference entitled “Critical Connections: Human Rights, Development Studies and the Social Sciences.” There were fifty-seven participants consisting of graduate students, PhD students, academics and human rights activists. Mr. Ramesh Singh, Chief Executive Officer of ActionAid International, delivered the keynote speech on the topic “Human Rights and Development.”

There were also panel presentations on the academic work in six sub-themes: Migration and Human Rights, Political Issues and Human Rights, Human Rights Education, Concerns in Political Economy, Current Issues in Development, Human Rights and Civil Society.

### Guest Lectures/Seminars

CHRSD strives to make the academic offerings of its program as socially relevant and practice-based as possible by inviting guest lecturers from NGOs and other organizations working in the field of human rights protection and advocacy. Special lectures are also coordinated on targeted issues of interest to a wider audience. These events are often open to alumni and other interested academics and members of the public.

Students have the opportunity to learn from specialists in human rights advocacy, policymakers, and academics; benefiting from the numerous international organizations and civil society members with a presence in Bangkok. Guest lecturers are often brought in to teach students on specialized topics in human rights, such as specialists in gender studies and international humanitarian law, human rights lawyers, and NGO practitioners. In 2009, guest lecturers included Prof. Viti Muntarbhorn from the Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University; Prof. Jumphot Saisoonthorn, PhD, Faculty of Law, Thammasat University; Ms. Cecilia Jimenez, Human Rights Lawyer, Consultant and Trainer; Ms. Nancy Pearson, New Tactics in Human Rights Project; Ms. Debbie Stothard, Alternative Asean Network on Burma (ALT-SEAN); Mr. Gopal Krishna Siwakoti, PhD, President, INHURED International/Pop Watch; Mr. Homayoun Alizadeh, PhD, Regional Representative Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); Mr. Pornchai Danvivathana, PhD, Deputy Director-General, Department of Treaties and Legal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand; Mr. Teerapat Asawasungsidhi, International Committee of the Red Cross

(ICRC), Regional Delegation; and Ms. Yuyun Wahyuningrum, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development.

Students also have the opportunity to visit organizations working at different levels and sectors in the human rights field, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC). In 2010, students of the International MA in Human Rights program will have the opportunity to visit one of the camps housing Burmese refugees, as well as the organizations working closely with them in the provision of assistance and services.

### **Feedback from Students**

The CHRSD students benefit from the diversity of the programs being offered, the opportunity to live in a close knit university community, interact with Thai students as well as the local surrounding community. CHRSD students come from widely differing cultural backgrounds and experience levels which makes learning from each other enjoyable, with the stimulating debate that ensues from different world views yet united in their commitment to human rights. The strong element of camaraderie that is built up through these shared experiences lasts beyond the end of the program, with alumni of the program constituting an invaluable resource for each other and the CHRSD.

The research done by the CHRSD students creates a substantive resource in a field that has a need for quality, targeted research. After ten years of the International MA in Human Rights program, close to one hundred theses have been completed or in the process of completion. Their topics focus on current pressing issues in the field of human rights relating to a wide range of sectors, including access to justice, right to food, education, health, and the rights of groups such as migrants, children, indigenous, and other vulnerable populations. Some of the most recent topics addressed by CHRSD students include the access to justice for trafficked women in Mongolia; refugee right to work in the Netherlands; Human Rights and Peace Education in Nepal; Rights Based Approach to Health Programming in Thailand.

### **Challenges and Concerns**

A number of challenges are involved in the creation of graduate level human rights education programs. First and foremost, the lack of formal policy on

teaching human rights within the education system constitutes a formidable barrier. This means a distinct lack of direction, support, and guidelines must be surmounted in order to start an accredited university program in human rights. Programs are often the initiative of devoted individuals with a personal interest in the field.

There is a general lack of high quality academic resources beyond the institutional level. As a discipline human rights is still nascent, and the academic study of human rights is relatively new when compared to other well-established fields of study such as law or political science. Added to this, globally the majority of human rights programs are taught from a legal perspective, thus the multi-disciplinary, social science approach of the CHRSD makes it especially challenging. The ramifications for the implementation of human rights education programs translates into the need for both quality research and teaching materials, as well as qualified teaching staff. This is especially true of the Thai program, where resources have to be translated into Thai language.

The innovation of the PhD in Human Rights and Peace Studies also poses a particular challenge in melding two related disciplines with distinct approaches into one-degree program (human rights from law, and conflict and peace studies from the social sciences). The PhD program aims to reflect the contemporary world where clear divisions between disciplines do not exist. That these two disciplines are closely linked and complementary is evident, but it also poses conceptual challenges to the curriculum and thus to the entire program. This is further complicated by the fact that to date, the students of the PhD program overwhelmingly favor the human rights strand of the study program as a choice for their own research.

### **Lessons Learned**

CHRSD has a number of lessons learned that are relevant to other institutions endeavoring to establish their own programs. As the longest running International MA in Human Rights program in the region, it has gone through an almost continual process of refinement. This is also true, but to a lesser degree, of the international PhD program as well as the Thai MA. Students have yet to graduate from these programs.

A clear vision for CHRSD is important to maintain a unified staff and mission. CHRSD runs its activities with a limited budget and a small staff.

In addition to running the three degree programs, with a fourth currently under development, the staff members are all highly active in the field of human rights. It has been important to revisit the mission and objectives of CHRSD as a whole to ensure that its faculty and staff are all working towards a common vision, and with a common understanding on how to reach this vision.

The promotion of the programs and targeted recruitment are key to attracting a qualified student base. A delicate balance must be struck between the aims of the programs and the needs of the students. This includes the requirements for accepting candidates taking into account the capabilities of the programs. Their human resources, including the ability to provide proper supervision of thesis topics and PhD research, limit smaller programs. Given the varying education standards throughout the region, it has been found that some students from less stringent academic backgrounds, and/or non-native English speakers, were in need of extra assistance to complete the requirements of the programs. This is particularly relevant for the international MA program, as a majority of students have NGO backgrounds. More stringent requirements have been imposed for the international PhD program, with higher expectations (students are expected to pursue academic career); the intake is kept lower to ensure both the high academic quality of students and the supervisory capabilities and areas of expertise of staff.

The design of the curriculum in a field with less academic resources also poses challenges. Providing compelling and relevant subject matters that reflect the current challenges in the field of human rights is an ongoing quest. A balance between the level and depth of topics that reflect the needs of students with the differing levels of academic and practical experiences

This is an enlarged version of the report entitled *Meeting the Challenge: Proven Practices for Human Trafficking Prevention in the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, published by the International Labour Organization Regional Office for the Asia-Pacific.