Area-Based Education: A Transformative Approach to Public Administration Program

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Abstract: Area-based education (ABE) in a public administration program is an innovative approach that seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice by immersing students in specific geographical contexts. This transformative educational model emphasizes contextual understanding, community engagement, practical experience, interdisciplinary learning, policy analysis and development, networking and collaboration, cultural competence, research and data collection, leadership development and sustainable development policy to prepare future public administrators for the complexities of public service. This academic article attempts to explores the key competences and benefits of area-based education, highlighting its role in cultivating informed and effective public servants. Additionally, it illustrates some case study of public administration program in Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Thaksin University playing the model of area-based education in Songkhla province, Thailand.

Keywords: Area-based education, Transformation, Public administration

Introduction

Public administration or bureaucracy is deeply ingrained in our society. Archaeological excavations have revealed prehistoric evidence indicating the existence of a rudimentary bureaucratic social structure approximately 19,000 years ago (Henry, 2018). Additionally, Johnston (2015) stated that the evolution of the public administration model during the period spanning from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s was predominantly shaped by several key factors. These factors include the theoretical framework of bureaucracy proposed by Weber, the recommendations put forth by Northcote and Trevelyan regarding the establishment of a professional civil service in Britain, and the ideas espoused by Woodrow Wilson in the United States emphasizing the separation of policy and administration. Throughout the years, certain managerial ideas and concepts have remained pertinent, such as Taylor's scientific management and Simon's rational decision-making. Governments have increasingly moved away from the conventional model of public administration, which has been in decline since the 1980s. Instead, they have embraced a managerialist model that draws inspiration from private-sector practices. This shift has occurred within the framework of a market-based economic model of public organization. In recent times, there has been a growing effort to strike a balance between the commercial orientation and a revitalized emphasis on public administration aimed at generating public benefit. Moreover, the historical narrative of public administration is shaped by the pivotal responsibilities fulfilled by public workers in governance (Morgan, Green, Shinn, Robinson & Banyan, 2022).

The generally definition of public administration is able to describe that public administration is an academic discipline that involves the provision of leadership by individuals in order to serve communities with the aim of promoting collective welfare and facilitating constructive transformations. Public administration experts possess the necessary abilities to effectively manage many levels of government, including local, state, and federal entities, as well as nonprofit organizations. The utilization of various competencies within

the realm of public administration, such as project management and program management, frequently exhibits transferability to the private sector (UNC, School of Government, 2023).

In addition, public administration and its more recent variant, public management, refer to the efforts by professional administrators and executive appointees to organize and operate government agencies for the purpose of implementing public policy. The administrative process is inherently political in at least two ways. One is that the actions of public administrators inevitably require choices, whose consequences are the authoritative allocation of benefits and costs. The other is that public administrators are rarely neutral agents of representative institutions but rather act strategically to maximize the influence of their agencies (Eisinger, 2001).

As mentioned by Henry (2018), the discipline of public administration has undergone a series of paradigm shifts, which have shaped its intellectual and professional development over time. These paradigms reflect the evolving self-perception of the field. Besides, the transformation of government may have occurred since 1990, when the paradigm of public administration was shifted to governance. Not only the terminology changed, but the education also shifted from administration to governance. Presently, the educational system in several schools of government around the world is undergoing a transformation. Since the education plays a crucial role in the pursuit of cultivating human capital and individuals with specialized knowledge and skills. Many nations are placing significant importance on their higher education systems, recognizing the necessity of producing graduates who possess qualities such as creativity, innovation, and knowledge. The following are the essential components necessary for transforming the economy and the nation into a high-income and developed entity. Consequently, nations have allocated substantial financial resources towards enhancing their education systems in order to achieve this goal (Kaliannan & Chandran, 2012). The educational system that garners the highest level of popularity is outcome-based education (OBE). That is why the outcome-based education has emerged as a significant and influential trend in multidisciplinary education in recent times, including public administration education (Davis, 2003).

However, public administration education in each state of the world is undergoing varying transformations and unpredictable situation challenges, including crises of socioeconomics, uncertain political movements, and ageing societies. Additionally, the 4th industrial revolution led to rising mechanization and interconnectivity which are anticipated to create a recondited social and economic transformation. While, the influence of these macro-transformations become more apparent (Korean Association for Public Administration, 2017), the scholars cannot implement only the concept of OBE in public administration education. Furthermore, the transforming performance of government from administration to governance still points to some idea to associate with area-based education (ABE) or place-based education (PBE), as identified the scope by Sobel (2004). The ABE or the PBE serves as a remedy for the prevalent lack of environmental consciousness shown in numerous educational institutions. The ABE, or the PBE, refers to the pedagogical approach that utilizes the immediate community and surrounding environment as a foundational framework for imparting knowledge and understanding across several academic disciplines within the curriculum.

Hence, this academic article will initially explore and analyze the key competences and benefits of area-based education in the public administration program, highlighting its role in cultivating informed and effective public servants. Additionally, it illustrates some case studies of the public administration program in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Thaksin University, playing on the model of area-based education in Songkhla province, Thailand.

By looking at the paper background, the following questions are addressed to fulfil this paper. The questions are: Q1. What are the key competencies and benefits of area-based education in the public administration program? Q2. To what extent does the public administration program at Thaksin University reflect the area-based education model?

This academic paper has two purposes. First, it aims to initially explore and analyze the key competencies and benefits of area-based education in public administration program, highlighting its role in cultivating informed and effective public servants. Second, the paper illustrates a case study of the public administration program in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Thaksin University, playing on the model of area-based education in Songkhla province, Thailand.

Outcome-Based Education (OBE)

By taking a look at the background concept of area-based education, the initiative concept is described to deliver this paper. It is outcome-based education. There have been numerous antecedents leading up to the transition towards outcome-based education over the past forty years. Several educational approaches have been developed that emphasize the acquisition of skills or criteria levels of performance through carefully structured instruction. These approaches include competence-based education, criterion-referenced learning, and mastery learning (Spady, 1982; Brady, 1994). The concepts and terminologies associated with outcome-based education encompass authentic assessment and multidisciplinary outcomes (Schwarz & Cavener, 1994). Additionally, Ralph W. Tyler introduced the fundamental ideas of what is now known as outcome-based education more than 40 years ago. One could posit that outcome-based education originated from the goals movement that took place during the 1950s (Guskey, 1992).

The term outcome-based education has been used in several situations and capacities, depending on the field of disciplines. Most scholars attempt to explain its definition and significance, such as Spady (1988), who recognized as a prominent follower of outcome-based education, whereby he provided a definition that entails structuring educational practices around desired outcomes. This approach involves aligning instructional strategies with the intended achievements. While, Devis (2003) mentioned that outcome-based education (OBE) is an educational strategy wherein the curriculum is determined by the desired learning outcomes that students are expected to demonstrate upon completion of a course. Additionally, in the context of outcome-based education, the process is defined by the product. Outcome-based education (OBE) can be characterized as a form of thinking that prioritizes results, in contrast to input-based education, which places emphasis on the educational process and is content with any outcome that may arise. A notable distinction exists between outcome-based education and the mere generation of results within a pre-existing curriculum. Moreover, the term outcome-based does not imply a curriculum that is simply supplemented with results. Since this approach represents a paradigm shift in the educational sector's public and private operations.

Presently, public administration should have implemented the approach of outcome-based education because of its advantages for the educational system. Harden (2002) states that there have been notable disparities between the discourse surrounding instructional objectives throughout the 1960s and 1970s and the contemporary focus on learning outcomes. Outcome-based education is characterized by several key elements. Firstly, there is a focus on the establishment of explicit and publicly available learning outcomes that students are expected to attain by the conclusion of a given course. Secondly, the curriculum,

learning strategies, and educational opportunities are carefully designed to facilitate the attainment of these learning outcomes. Thirdly, the assessment process is aligned with the identified learning outcomes, and individual students are evaluated to ensure their successful achievement of these outcomes. Lastly, appropriate measures are taken to provide additional support or enrichment to students as necessary.

As mentioned above, the fourth industrial revolution is expected to bring about profound social and economic changes through increased mechanization and interconnectedness. The importance of these big changes is growing, and so are the problems with using outcome-based education (OBE) alone in public administration classes. This is because government performance is changing from administration to governance. Hence, the newness approach to public administration education is area-based education (ABE) or place-based education (PBE). It is rising along with outcome-based education.

Area-Based Education (ABE)

As the significantly question of what are the key competences and benefits of area-based education in public administration program? Let us review and discuss the key competences and benefits of area-based education in public administration program from the academic papers of several investigators and scholars, both in the western and eastern worlds.

During the mid-1990s, educators in various regions within the United States and other countries-initiated trials of an instructional and educational approach that sought to cultivate both communal and environmental revitalization. This approach, also referred to as area-based education, centers its attention on the local context. Individuals that follow this ideology have been attracted to this particular body of work due to a multitude of factors, including the advancement of more captivating methods of teaching, the fostering of active participants in society, and the growth of individuals dedicated to the prudent management and preservation of natural resources and environments. Area-based education is not easily categorized within certain academic disciplines, such as science or social studies. It constitutes an instructional and curriculum development method that recognizes and leverages the local contexts in which students reside, with the aim of immersing them in the discourses and practices of many academic disciplines. Above all else, educators who employ this methodology possess a shared viewpoint regarding pedagogy and knowledge acquisition, which enables them to recognize the educational opportunities presented by phenomena beyond the confines of the classroom. The community and environment are perceived as supplementary sources of information for student learning (Smith, 2013).

Public administration plays a vital role in shaping the governance and development of societies. To ensure the effectiveness and relevance of public administrators, there is a growing need to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world challenges. Area-based education for public administration emerges as a transformative approach that immerses students in specific geographical contexts compounded with contextual understanding, community engagement, practical experience, interdisciplinary learning, policy analysis and development, networking and collaboration, cultural competence, research and data collection, leadership development, and sustainable development policy to prepare future public administrators for the complexities of public service.

The area-based approach, as represented in the transformative educational model, has multiple key competences and advantages for public administration education. The key competences and advantages include the following:

1. Contextual Understanding

Area-based education focuses on developing a comprehensive understanding of the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts of a particular region (Chen & Su, 2021). By studying local histories, challenges, and opportunities, students gain insights into the unique issues faced by communities and institutions within the area. This deep contextual understanding lays the foundation for informed decision-making and effective public administration.

2. Community Engagement

At the heart of area-based education is active community engagement (O'Brien, Ćulum Ilić, Veidemane, Dusi, Farnell & Šćukanec Schmidt, 2022). Students collaborate with local stakeholders, government agencies, and non-profit organizations to identify pressing issues and co-create solutions (Malik, Hazarika, & Dhaliwal, 2022). This hands-on approach fosters a sense of civic responsibility and a commitment to public service by addressing the real needs of the community.

3. Practical Experience

Area-based education provides students with practical experiences in real-life settings. Through internships, fieldwork, and experiential learning, they apply theoretical concepts to address the challenges faced by the region (Othman & Nasrudin, 2016). This practical exposure enhances their problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills (Steiner & Laws, 2006).

4. Interdisciplinary Learning

The complex issues faced by specific regions often require an interdisciplinary approach. Area-based education encourages students to draw insights from various fields, including economics, sociology, environmental studies, and public policy (Saxena, 2012). This holistic learning equips future public administrators to approach challenges from a multidimensional perspective (Bajada & Trayler, 2013).

5. Policy Analysis and Development

Through area-based education, students analyze existing policies and propose context-specific solutions (Jeong, 2015). This process enables them to understand the impact of policies on the ground and fosters an appreciation for evidence-based policymaking (Blyton, Heery, & Turnbull, 2001). By developing tailored policies, students learn to address the unique needs of the community they serve.

6. Networking and Collaboration

Area-based education facilitates networking opportunities with local policymakers, community leaders, and practitioners (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). Engaging with diverse stakeholders enhances students' understanding of the complexities of public administration and provides valuable insights into the functioning of governance systems (Munoz, Queupil, & Fraser, 2016).

7. Cultural Competence

Working within a specific region allows students to develop cultural competence and sensitivity (Wood, 2021). Understanding and respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of community members enables public administrators to build trust and foster inclusive governance (Matu & Perez-Johnston, 2024).

8. Research and Data Collection

As part of area-based education, students may conduct research and collect data from the region (Sun, 2014). This research contributes to the body of knowledge on regional challenges, helping future administrators make informed decisions based on evidence (Kennan, Corrall, & Afzal, 2014).

9. Leadership Development

Through community-based projects and collaborative initiatives, students develop leadership skills (Elmuti, Minnis, & Abebe, 2005). Effective communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution abilities are honed as they work with diverse stakeholders towards common goals (Flumerfelt & Banachowski, 2011).

10. Sustainable Development

Area-based education emphasizes sustainable development and long-term planning for the region (Daú, Scavarda, Rosa Alves, Santa, & Ferrer, 2023). Public administrators learn to balance economic growth, social equity, and environmental preservation in their policies and initiatives (Rondinelli, 2007).

Case study: The implementation of area-based education for the public administration program at Thaksin University

In 2005, the Public Administration Program was initiated by the steering committee of the Social Sciences Department, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Thaksin University. The first philosophy of this program was to build and develop the competency of human capital in the locality of Thailand. Hence, the local government was the program's majority, which launched the educational circumstance of public administration at Thaksin University.

Outcome-based education have been introduced in all programs at Thaksin University since 2019 because of quality assurance in higher education approach. In view of the fact that the Regional Report of Asia and the Pacific of UNESCO mentions quality assurance in the higher education as the systematic management and assessment procedures to monitor the performance of higher educational institutions (ASEAN University Network, 2020). AUN QA, or ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance, was implemented at Thaksin University as a major mechanism to drive outcome-based education. Eight criteria were followed in the outcome-based curriculum planning process, and those eight criteria are described here.

1. Expected learning outcomes (ELO)
2. Program structure and content
3. Teaching and learning approach
4. Student assessment
5. Academic staff
6. Student support services
7. Facilities and infrastructure
8. Output and outcomes

Stakeholder Needs					

⇕   ⇕

Expected Learning Outcomes	⇒	Program Structure and Content	Teaching and Learning Approach	Student Assessment	⇒	Achievement
	⇒	Academic Staff	Student Support Services	Facilities and Infrastructure	⇒	
	⇒	Output and Outcomes			⇒	

⇕   ⇕

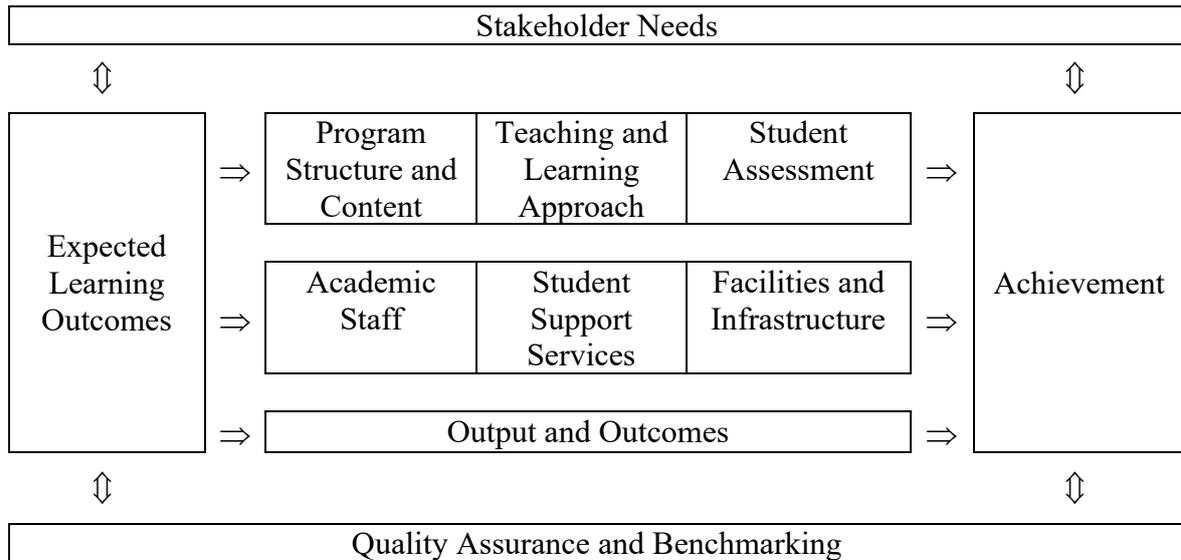| Quality Assurance and Benchmarking |
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Figure 1: AUN-QA Assessment Model at the Program Level (version 4.0)
Source: ASEAN University Network (2020: 12)

According to the practice of the Public Administration Program at Thaksin University, the programme not only played a role in outcome-based education but also inserted the ten key competences into it. That is why ten key competences were followed in the area-based curriculum planning process, and those ten key competences are described as follows:

In the identification of the outcomes of the educational process in the context of area-based education, it is imperative that the exit learning outcomes are explicitly and precisely stated, leaving no room for ambiguity. The 10 key competences for learning outcomes were established through the facilitation of discussion and debate among faculty members in the field of public administration education. The learning outcomes encompassed in this context are as follows:

1. Competence in contextual understanding – the students should have a comprehensive understanding of the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts of a particular region relating to local histories, challenges, and opportunities. For example, the students understood and could explain the histories, challenges, and opportunities regarding the social, economic, political, and cultural situation of Songkhla and Southern Thailand, along with the mind map associated with the topic of organizational structure in the organization theories class.

2. Competence in community engagement skill – the students are able to collaborate with local stakeholders, government agencies, and non-profit organizations to identify pressing issues and co-produce or co-create solutions. For example, the public administration program always promoted the concept of active learning together with community-based learning in Ban Mai Community, Thepa District, Songkhla. Since 2020, the programme has initiated cooperation with women groups, community enterprises, village headmen, and local government based on the academic service project on Mineral Water for life. Until nowadays, this community has become the classroom for the marketing in the public sector course.

3. Competence to perform practical experience – the students must participate in practical experiences in real-life settings such as internships, fieldwork, and

experiential learning. They are able to apply theoretical concepts to address the challenges faced by the locality or region. For example, the internship or cooperative education course was drawn from the curriculum of the public administration program. The student should select the task force associated with the abilities and competencies of the public administration approach. In addition, they should pay attention for 16 weeks at the local or national organization. During the work, the students had to report the task force back to the supervisor, who took part in their responsibilities. Finally, they must present the benefits of their task forces in the seminar session.

4. Competence in the skill of interdisciplinary learning – the students can explore the complex issues faced by specific regions, often require an interdisciplinary approach. Area-based education encourages students to draw insights from various fields. This holistic learning equips future public administrators to approach challenges from a multidimensional perspective. For example, the program always encouraged interdisciplinary learning skills in the students through the field trip project. In 2018, the program launched an educational field trip project for public administration students in Japan. Most of them were able to learn various disciplines from Japanese society and compare the differences between OVOP in Japan and OTOP in Thailand.

5. Competence to perform policy analysis and development – the students analyze existing policies and propose context-specific solutions. This process enables them to understand the impact of policies on the ground and fosters an appreciation for evidence-based policymaking. For example, the public policy and public project management and planning courses were addressed in the curriculum of the public administration program. The program always encouraged the students to compete on the stage of public policy debates organised by universities and government agencies. In 2023, a group of public administration students is able to develop a solution to a public problem in the southern community and finally become the winner on the debate stage at Suratthani Rajabhat University.

6. Competence to retrieve and handle networking and collaboration – the students are able to apply the networking opportunities with local policymakers, community leaders, and practitioners. Engaging with diverse stakeholders enhances students' understanding of the complexities of public administration and provides valuable insights into the functioning of governance systems. For example, the public administration program was always conjoined with Sabayoi Cooperative Limited, Songkhla to be the classroom on the topic of organization and management. The benefit of collaboration between the program and Sabayoi Cooperative Limited for students is not only knowledge but also extensive networking for other partnerships.

7. Competence in cultural perception – the students can develop cultural competence and sensitivity. Understanding and respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of community members enables public administrators to build trust and foster inclusive governance. For example, Thaksin University was located in Songkhla. The general perception of people in this city is multiculturalism. Hence, the students who study in Songkhla get an advantage in learning comparative culture and practicing communication skills with diverse cultural groups.

8. Competence to investigate research and data collection – the students may conduct research and collect data from the region. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on regional challenges, helping future administrators make informed decisions based on evidence. For example, the research methodology and independent studies courses were placed in the curriculum of the public administration program. Two courses have been

assigned to the students because of their significance and contribution to future work, both in local and national organizations and graduate school.

9. Competence in the skill of leadership development – the students develop leadership skills. Effective communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution abilities are honed as they work with diverse stakeholders towards common goals. For example, leadership is not only a core course of a public administration program but also a core competency skill. The students must register for this course to train in the three-circle model associating technical intelligence, practice, and personal intelligence. Besides, before graduating, the student should participate in the leadership training project of the local or national executive officer in Songkhla or nearby.

10. Competence to manage sustainable development goals – the students emphasize sustainable development goals and long-term planning for the region. Public administrators learn to balance economic growth, social equity, and environmental preservation in their policies and initiatives. For example, presently, the program always announces the newness vision of Thaksin University. It is a social innovation university that has been relating to sustainable development goals (SDGs) since 2019. The program attempts to implement SDGs into all courses, such as those in development administration, public project management and planning, and electronic office. Moreover, in 2023, the program created an educational field trip project for the latest public administration students in Khon Khan, in the northeast and Bangkok, in the central region of Thailand. Most of them were able to learn three features of Khon Khan and Bangkok society and explain the differences between the northeastern, central, and southern societies in Thailand.

As mentioned above, outcome-based education (OBE) and area-based education (ABE) can be blended together to enhance and transform the learning processes and curriculum services of the public administration program. OBE is an educational theory that highlights the desired outcomes of the learning process. OBE begins with clearly defining the outcomes that students are expected to achieve by the end of their educational experience. These outcomes dictate the curriculum, teaching methods, assessments, and educational strategies used throughout the learning process. While OBE has the potential to transform educational systems and significantly improve learning outcomes, its implementation can be challenging. It requires a shift in mindset from educators, substantial planning and resources to redesign curricula, and ongoing support to ensure the successful adoption of OBE principles (International Islamic University Malaysia, 2025). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure the achievement and fostering of OBE through ABE. The major principle of ABE is to enhance the educational experiences of young generations by creating rich connections with the communities, cities, and cultures that surround them and by distributing the education effort across the people, organizations, and institutions of a local area (Royal Society of Arts, 2012). Moreover, the idea behind an area-based approach is for universities to work in partnership with their communities-such as businesses, cultural organizations, parents, and voluntary groups-to construct a curriculum that is localized, contextual, relevant, and engaging (Facer & Thomas, 2012; Royal Society of Arts, 2012). ABE explores how the history, geography, culture, and people within a localized community can enrich learning experiences in schools. The purpose behind this effort is to increase the young generation's understanding of the place they live and embed institutes more deeply within their communities (Evans & Savage, 2015). In short, OBE and ABE emphasize the explicit delineation of necessary capabilities for public administration students at the conclusion of their educational journey, subsequently structuring and executing the educational framework to facilitate the attainment of these skills while maintaining locality engagement.

Additionally, the benefit of ABE is extended to curriculum assessment according to the AUN-QA framework since ABE recognizes that stakeholders' needs in the different regions have unique challenges and opportunities. The public administration program is able to tailor its curriculum and teaching methods to address the specific needs of the region of stakeholders that they serve. For example, a program focused on local government might incorporate case studies and simulations based on the local context. In addition to ABE, it can also involve community engagement and communication with strategic partners, as mentioned in the AUN-QA framework. The public administration program can work with local organizations and government agencies to provide students with real-world learning experiences and opportunities to contribute to their communities and drive their achievement in learning outcomes. This is illustrated in figure 1.2.
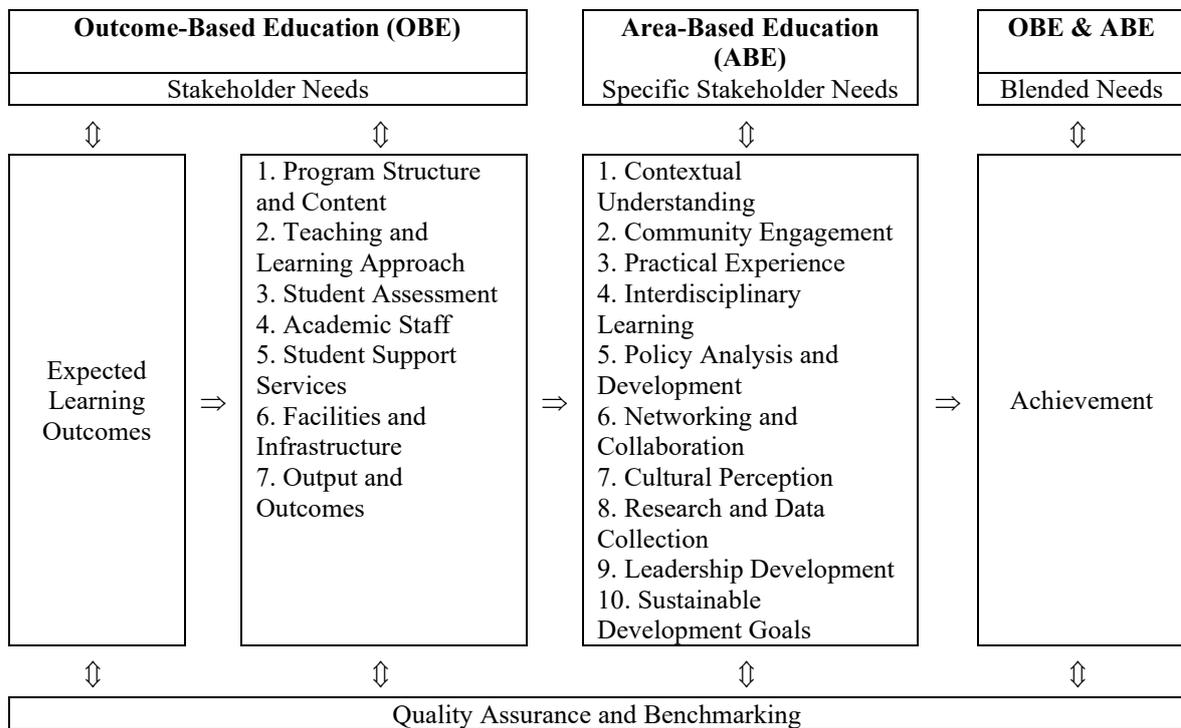
Outcome-Based Education (OBE)		Area-Based Education (ABE)	OBE & ABE
Stakeholder Needs		Specific Stakeholder Needs	Blended Needs
⇕	⇕	⇕	⇕
Expected Learning Outcomes ⇒	1. Program Structure and Content 2. Teaching and Learning Approach 3. Student Assessment 4. Academic Staff 5. Student Support Services 6. Facilities and Infrastructure 7. Output and Outcomes ⇒	1. Contextual Understanding 2. Community Engagement 3. Practical Experience 4. Interdisciplinary Learning 5. Policy Analysis and Development 6. Networking and Collaboration 7. Cultural Perception 8. Research and Data Collection 9. Leadership Development 10. Sustainable Development Goals ⇒	Achievement
⇕	⇕	⇕	⇕
Quality Assurance and Benchmarking			

Figure 2: An Integrated AUN-QA, OBE and ABE Framework
Source: modified from ASEAN University Network (2020: 12)

Conclusion

ABE serves as a platform to facilitate the successful implementation of OBE, necessitating a transformation in educators' mindsets, comprehensive preparation, and resources to revamp courses within the public administration program. ABE for public administration is a transformative approach that prepares future administrators to address the complex challenges faced by specific regions. By fostering contextual understanding, community engagement, and sustainable policy development, this approach equips students with the skills and mindset needed to excel in public service. Through interdisciplinary learning, practical experiences, and cultural competence, ABE empowers public administrators to become catalysts for positive change and inclusive governance in their

communities. As the demands of public administration continue to evolve, embracing ABE becomes essential to creating a cadre of responsive and effective public servants. Moreover, a case study of the public administration program in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Thaksin University is able to explain and extend the model of ABE in Songkhla province, Thailand.

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