

WEBSTER UNIVERSITY CHA-AM POLLING, POLITICS AND DR. PITTERS

The Head of the Webster University, Department for Arts and Sciences, Dr Robin Ramcharan recently provided Hua Hin & Cha - Am Today with an opportunity to experience the knowledge and insights of a world renowned academic expert. In this case the visiting speaker was Dr Harald Pitters, an expert in the field of social and media research and more specifically in the area of opinion polling.



Introducing Dr Pitters was his wife Dr Julia Pitters, an Assistant Professor of Webster University whose areas of expertise in research and social psychology blends well with her husband's speciality. She has been teaching at the Webster Cha - Am campus recently in the psychology of personal decision making. As well as other academics and visitors, her students were exposed to the field of opinion polling as a very relevant adjunct to their studies.

After finishing his studies of law and political sciences in Salzburg, Madrid and Budapest, Harald Pitters obtained his doctorate degree with an empirical study about the ambivalent relationship between politics, media and social trends at the University of Salzburg. He began his professional career at the EU Commission in Luxembourg and subsequently worked in Brussels as a project coordinator for the "Eurobarometer". In 2001, he moved to Hamburg where he worked as a project manager for national and international (qualitative and quantitative) research projects at Ipsos Germany. From 2004-2009 Harald Pitters was department head of "Social and Media Research" at the Austrian Gallup Institute.

He was in charge of the "Eurobarometer", the "Media Analysis" as well as miscellaneous other social, political and media research projects. In 2010, he founded the research and consulting company Pitters Trendexpert, focusing on empirical law research. He is lecturer at diverse other educational institutions and is a legitimated and certified expert at the court.

A clear message to the audience was the importance of a rigorous and research based methodology to ensure that poll results are valid and meaningful. Gone are the days when huge samples are required as the informed selection of a small though representative sample of participants

has been shown to be just as predictive. Of course polls remain an imperfect method of understanding public opinion but there is no other way gathering this information. Dr Pitters discussed a variety of potential biases which may influence results. This included gender inequality, interview techniques, an awareness of the environment

and the timing of the polls.

One topic of some debate amongst the audience was the potential influence of poll results on voter choices including a potential for voters to either 'follow the favourite' or conversely 'support the underdog'.

A recent election Bangkok was mentioned as an example of political polling issues by one of the audience. In this situation some pollsters were very wrong about the predicted winner of the election. To the embarrassment of the pollsters one commentator said "this is really the standard of the opinion polls we Thais are accustomed to." The pollsters took flak from many social media users. "Pongsapat won in the last 45 days but lost on the day when it mattered most," said one Facebook comment. Another message read: "My condolences to the pollsters which sank to their demise when the ballots were tallied and counted." Noppadon Kannikar, Abac Poll Director responded saying: "People should not believe everything the pollsters say".

The clear message was that some pollsters really need to improve methodology, consider sampling techniques, overhaul data processing, and attempt to eliminate biased respondents. In some parts of the world poll results are not allowed to be published for a period prior to voting day although Dr Pitters believes that the public's right to know overrides this potential voter influence.

The Pitters family is soon to return to Austria to resume their respective careers. This includes their young son who was a 'guest' at this presentation!

Exposure to speakers such as Dr Pitters really demonstrates that regional tertiary institutions are well connected to international resources and expertise to increase the value of a Thailand university experience. Dr Julia and Dr Harald Pitters (left) with Webster University colleagues. Dr Pitters listening to audience comments.