
UNIT 3 SUKHOTHAI THAMMATHIRAT OPEN UNIVERSITY, THAILAND

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Editors' note: Thailand has two open universities, Ramkhamhaeng and Sukhothai Thammathirat. The former was established in 1971 and the latter in 1978. For obvious reasons, the former must be its own model, but the latter certainly incorporates some of the features of the UKOU. Our interest in this case lies in a study of how a particular model can be fitted into differing local situations, at both the policy level and the level of implementation. In particular the reader may notice the following points:

- (a) Placing less emphasis on end-of-year examination and more on internal assessment, besides being an educational reform in itself, has motivated STOU to make its course materials more self-instructional than the course materials of many open universities. Giving credence to learners, own judgement regarding their having achieved what they wanted to from a particular course is a step forward in imbibing self-learning, independent learning and lifelong learning – a step towards positive changes in the very socio-educational ethos of the country.*
- (b) The role of the institutions of higher education has been shifting from training civil servants to providing socially relevant education to working adults and the uneducated. Accordingly, Thailand expects the conventional universities to take up the training of specialised manpower increasingly, while the open universities could focus on continuing education. This points to a major shift as far as the role of open universities is concerned. This also answers the issues regarding standards of education, increasing educated unemployment and democratisation of education.*
- (c) STOU presents a good example of pragmatism in course design and student support services – their texts, by and large, are self-sufficient and self-instructional, whereby they reduce the dependence on external materials; they recognise print as the main medium, using electronic media only as a supplementary component (without raising any euphoria about the importance and necessity of such media); they use public libraries to help distance learners, and this has been possible because of the active and deliberate involvement of the government in the university programmes; and lastly they generate their own financial resources, as the university does not depend entirely on*

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governmental funding as most open universities do: it should be interesting to compare the economies of the UKOU and STOU. One cannot help thinking that the STOU model may be of greater relevance to developing countries than the models developed in advanced countries.

Background

Thailand has an area approximately equal to that of France, and all of its territory lies within the tropical zone; nearly half of the land area is under cultivation, and the rest is covered largely by forest. The country's population at present is about 52 million, and the annual growth rate is 1.5 per cent. Most Thais are engaged in agriculture, but the urban population, mostly in Bangkok, is increasing and is now about 15 per cent of the total. The majority of Thais are Buddhists, and Buddhism is the essential spiritual basis of the national culture and way of life. However, there is a large Muslim minority, and other religions are freely practised.

Thailand has a recorded history going back to the 13th century. The Kings of Siam allowed Europeans into the country as traders and advisors, and in the second half of the 19th century many Siamese were sent to Europe to study. The ideas imported from Europe led to a change of regime in 1932, when the traditional absolute monarchy was replaced by a constitutional monarchy, which is the system followed in the modern kingdom of Thailand.

As a constitutional monarchy, Thailand is a multi-party parliamentary democracy in which legislation is enacted by an elected National Assembly consisting of a Senate and a House of Representatives. At local government level, the country is divided into 73 provinces. The administration of the country is mainly along centralised lines, and the capital city, Bangkok, is the location of the headquarters of most government agencies and also the country's commercial centre.

Thailand's economy is traditionally based on agriculture, especially on the production of rice, and 80 per cent of the population are engaged in it. However, there has been a rapid growth in manufacturing in the last two decades, and foreign investment in industry has been encouraged. The process of industrialization is beginning to change the economic picture dramatically, and earnings from exports of manufactured products are expected soon to surpass those of agricultural products.

The Role of Higher Education in National Development

Since the Second World War, Thailand, like most other countries, has experienced significant changes in its social and economic structure, and the influx of new technology has placed great demands on its higher education system. Originally established to train civil servants for the administration of the country, the universities had to attempt to meet the need for specialized manpower to contribute to national economic development. At the same time, rising standards of living and the consequent rise in expectations led to a social demand for access to higher education. The number of universities

has risen from 05 in 1945 to 16 state-run universities and institutes, and these are supplemented by a number of private universities and colleges, all of which come under the supervision of the Ministry of University Affairs. In addition, about 250 post-secondary institutions operate under the supervision of the Ministries of Education and Public Health.

In response to the demand for university education and the inability of the closed-admission universities to accommodate the large numbers of applicants, two open universities have been established. The first, Ramkhamhaeng University, was founded in 1971, and within 10 years had outgrown its facilities, requiring a second campus. The second open university, Sukhothai Thammathirat, was established in 1978 as a distance education institution and was therefore not constrained by considerations of space. STOU was founded in order to provide broader educational opportunities to working adults, who by means of STOU's multi-media distance teaching and learning system were able to study to degree level without having to leave their places of residence and employment.

In view of the pressing national need for specialized manpower, it seems likely that the role of producing such personnel will increasingly be taken over by the conventional universities, while STOU, as a distance education open university, will offer opportunities for continuing education to the public on a more general level as part of the adult education program, as well as playing a role in the production of specialized manpower.

EDUCATIONAL BROADCASTING

Radio broadcasting in Thailand started in 1930 and, together with television, is now a thriving industry. Educational broadcasting began with the establishment of the School Broadcasting Division in the Ministry of Education in 1963.

School radio programs are provided by the Ministry of Education and total some 30 hours per week. Adult radio programs are broadcast by a variety of institutions including the Public Relations Department, the Ministry of Education and some universities, in particular Kasetsart University, which concentrates on agricultural education material.

Educational television is expanding, as the two open universities produce their own programs, in addition to those produced by the Center for Educational Technology of the Ministry of Education. There is a need to coordinate the work of the various institutions, and planning is underway to that effect. An additional TV channel is being planned which will be dedicated to educational and informational programs; a similar scheme for a National Radio Network for Education and Development was completed in 1982.

THE DISTANCE EDUCATION SITUATION IN THAILAND

While STOU itself is the largest distance education institution in Thailand, there are a number of educational establishments which employ distance teaching/learning methods, although most do not use a full range of multi-media techniques to the same extent.

The Department of Non-formal Education uses some of the media associated with distance education, although it is not primarily a distance education institution. Most of its programs depend on teacher-student contact, but some take the form of radio-correspondence courses using educational radio and television programs. Students follow the radio or television programs, study correspondence materials and meet tutors in groups for a predetermined number of hours per week. The subjects covered include vocational skills, specific training and functional literacy.

The Ministry of Education's Centre for Educational Technology plays an important role in both formal and non-formal education by investigating and applying new technology. It also provides educational radio and television programs at the request of schools and universities, and functions as a training center.

Other institutions involved in applying distance education techniques include teacher training colleges in Bangkok and the provinces, Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Pharmaceutical Science and College of Engineering, and the Ministry of Education's In-Service Teacher Training Division. The media employed by these institutions consist mostly of radio programs, audio-cassettes and correspondence materials.

Distance education appears to be an appropriate and effective means of meeting the demand for increased educational opportunities in developing countries such as Thailand, in which higher education should no longer be the privilege of the urban elite but the right of all citizens in every region of the country. Distance education methods can relieve the pressure on the centralized educational facilities in the capital city, and also can relieve the financial pressure on the government by offering a cost-effective solution to the problem of meeting the vastly-increased demand for higher education. The very large enrolments result in economies of scale, so as to bring costs within the pocket of persons with low incomes.

The Thai environment is favourable to the application of distance education methods, with a largely literate population and the widespread availability of radio and TV sets. Techniques tried out in other developing countries could usefully be applied to the situation in Thailand, and distance education would seem likely to make an important contribution in the future to the education of a skilled population which can respond to the needs of the new technological society.

SUKHOTHAI THAMMATHIRAT OPEN UNIVERSITY

Despite the establishment of a number of new universities in the 1960's and 1970's, the demand for higher education was such that large numbers of secondary school leavers were unable to gain admission. The first open university, Ramkhamhaeng, still relied on classroom instruction. A large sector of the population still remained unserved: those who were unable to leave their homes or employment to attend classes. The requirement became evident for a means of extending educational opportunities in a more

equitable manner to previously neglected groups of people, to make up for missed opportunities and to improve the quality of their lives.

At the same time there was a growing concern with the concept of life-long education. An alternative system of education was needed which would allow people to take university courses without having to attend classes. The establishment of an open university employing distance learning and teaching techniques seemed to offer a cost-effective answer to these problems, particularly in a developing country like Thailand, with its limited resources. Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) was therefore established in 1978.

STOU's philosophy is based on the principle of life-long education and the need to improve the quality of life of the general public by offering them hitherto inaccessible opportunities for further study. An open admission system is used in conjunction with multi-media distance teaching/learning techniques to put this philosophy into practice. The University's objectives are to enable a wider spectrum of the population to raise their educational standards, to promote research, to render a public service to society by disseminating knowledge, and to preserve and develop the national culture. Its mode of operation is to make use of a wide range of media so as to enable people to study by themselves without having to attend classes.

Academic structure

Two types of program of study are offered: degree programs, and non-degree program. Non-degree programs are offered as an educational service to the general public, as part of the Continuing Education Program. Other educational services to the community include training courses in specific subjects to specialized groups such as the Police Force and government officials.

STOU is organized into Schools rather than Faculties, each with its Board of Studies responsible for its own major study area. At present the Schools are:

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| 1. Liberal Arts | 6. Health Science |
| 2. Educational Studies | 7. Home Economics |
| 3. Management Science | 8. Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives |
| 4. Law | 9. Political Science |
| 5. Economics | 10. Communication Arts |

Each School is responsible for the planning and production of the curriculum and instructional materials for its area of studies. The permanent academic staff of the Schools are supplemented by external Academic Assessors, who advise on academic standards and the curriculum.

Methods of instruction

Each six-credit distance teaching/learning course follows a standard 15-unit format. One unit requires one week's study. The basic medium consists of printed self-instructional course books, and these are supplemented by audio-

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cassettes, radio and television broadcasts, and regular tutorial and counselling sessions at local and regional study centres.

The maximum number of courses allowed to be taken per semester is 3, at 6 credits per courses. The number of credits required for a bachelor's degree is between 132 and 144.

Evaluation is by means of end-of-semester examinations, using a grade system of 'H' (Honours), 'S' (Satisfactory) and 'U' (Unsatisfactory). The minimum grade for the award of a degree is 'S' in all courses. At the end of a student's study, he must attend an intensive residential study workshop as a culminating activity before qualifying for the award of a degree.

As there is no classroom teaching in the conventional sense, STOU has only a small permanent academic staff, supplemented by a larger number of part-time outside experts from other academic institutions. This arrangement ensures flexibility and also the cooperation and participation of persons throughout the nation's academic community.

A national network of regional and local study centres has been built up throughout the country to provide self-study materials and facilities in the provinces. Local facilities and academic staff are used by arrangement, so that tutorial sessions and examinations can be held in the student's own province.

While the university prints its own texts as the core medium, it has to rely on existing broadcasting networks for its radio and television programs. These programs are pre-recorded in the University's own studios and then dispatched for broadcasting.

Administrative structure

STOU is an autonomous institution under the supervision and guidance of the Ministry of University Affairs, with a Rector, University Council and Academic Senate.

The distance teaching system

The distance teaching system employed at STOU uses an integrated multi-media approach, and production follows the 'STOU PLAN', which consists of 5 stages:

1. Identifying educational needs and target groups.
2. Designing the curriculum.
3. Selecting and producing the teaching media packages, using 5 criteria: availability, accessibility, acceptability, validity and economy, so as to form an integrated multi-media self-learning package.
4. Establishing delivery systems (by mail for the printed material, radio and TV for broadcast programs) and tutorial sessions at local study centres.

5. Evaluation and follow-up: This consists firstly of evaluation of student learning by examination, and secondly of system evaluation to obtain feedback regarding the curriculum and materials.

Each printed course text is produced by a course team consisting of both permanent STOU staff and outside materials specialists. The text is designed as a self-sufficient and self-learning package.

FACTORS FOR CONSIDERATION IN THAILAND'S DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION

a. The case for distance teaching in higher education

As mentioned previously, the distance teaching system is seen as an effective and economical means of dealing with the ever-increasing demand for university education and of broadening opportunities for further training.

b. The planning stage

In the initial planning stage, starting in 1976 with the forming of a Planning Committee, surveys were made of public educational needs, distance education techniques, distance education systems used in other countries, and the infrastructure that would be needed. The results were incorporated into the structure of STOU when it was established in 1978.

c. The search for an appropriate distance teaching system

Studies of existing open universities in other countries led to the conclusion that the socio-economic environment in Thailand required distance teaching systems suited to the particular conditions existing in this country. One consequence of this was that printed course materials were decided on as the main medium, with broadcast programs as supplementary material.

d. Issues relating to adaptability

The varying backgrounds of the student population of an open university need to be considered when designing an integrated self-learning package, so as to ensure that it is academically effective and achieves uniform results.

A further issue concerns the differing attitudes of mature working adults and recent secondary school leavers to the self-discipline needed for distance learning. The regular supplementary tutorial sessions help to overcome the isolation of distance learners.

e. Issues relating to quality and standards

The question of acceptance of its standards has been dealt with by STOU by involving external materials producers from the academic community at large. As a result, any doubts about STOU's standards have been

dispelled. The search needs to be continued for the means of maintaining high quality instruction, however. Acceptance of STOU's standards has been aided by the widespread popularity and use of its printed texts and other materials.

f. Issues relating to wastage and surplus

The drop-out rate is naturally higher from open universities than from conventional ones, but STOU considers this is acceptable if it has fulfilled some of its objectives in democratizing education in the country. The question of over-production and consequent under-employment of graduates is less important for STOU than for other universities, as most of STOU's students are adults already in employment.

g. Issues relating to equity

STOU has assumed the responsibility, in conformity with the Government's policy of democratizing education, of offering a variety of courses as part of its Continuing Education Program. These courses are particularly aimed at disadvantaged sectors of the community and are appropriate for presentation by distance education methods.

h. Some strengths of distance higher education in Thailand

Distance education is an effective and economical means of extending educational opportunities to large numbers of people in developing countries such as Thailand in which resources are limited. Less-privileged groups can benefit from the advantages of higher education, and so improve their prospects.

STOU's distance education system has made it possible for anyone in the country to undertake further study and improve himself at any stage in his life.

Other advantages are that the integrated and interdisciplinary approach has dissolved rivalry between different academic departments, and that the courses offered by STOU represent the combined products of the country's most outstanding academics. Self-study by distance education is available to all, and is particularly attractive to more mature adults, as it offers privacy and the freedom to work at the individual's own pace.

STOU's distance teaching system has the flexibility to adapt itself to the needs of students with different needs and levels of ability, to respond to future tasks and challenges, and to offer equality of educational opportunities to unlimited number of applicants.

i. Some weaknesses of distance higher education

Individual study by distance education methods requires self-discipline, and this is difficult for some learners to develop, especially in the culture of teacher-centred learning predominant in Thailand. Younger students

especially may prefer the social interaction found in classroom teaching. Availability of the equipment required to use all the integrated media may be another problem in some remote areas. More opportunities for face-to-face contact with teachers are required, to allow students to ask questions and get explanations and clarification.

THE MANAGEMENT AND ECONOMICS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THAILAND

a. The management of distance education

The management of distance education at STOU involves the following systems:

admission and registration	instruction
production	examination
delivery	administration

Applicants who meet admission requirements are admitted without an entrance examination; fees must be paid for course materials, and tuition. Once admitted and registered, students embark on their programs of study, taking at least one course but not more than three courses per semester.

Each course is produced by a course team which includes qualified materials writers from outside STOU. New course team members attend an intensive workshop on course writing before they start developing course materials.

The *delivery system* is a vital component of the distance education operations, and STOU works closely with the Communications Authority of Thailand to ensure that students receive the materials for their courses on time.

Optional *tutorials* provide students with the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with teachers, and are held on weekends at local study centers. Each course is supplemented by 10 to 15 hours' tutorial sessions per semester. Tutorials are held for about 30% of the courses and are attended by about 30% of the students.

For certain courses in agricultural extension and health science, special study centers have been set up as places for practical work.

Student guidance and counselling is performed by staff members of local study centers, and local students' Clubs are encouraged.

In order to provide library services, 75 'STOU Corners' have been set up in public libraries throughout the country, containing STOU materials and additional reading materials.

Examination system

Final examinations are held every semester in every province of the country

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at the regional and local study centers. Students who fail may re-take the examinations. More details on the management of STOU are given in ES 314.

b. The economics of distance higher education

Institutional costs

Thai State-run universities normally receive 90% of their expenditure from the Government. STOU's share of the total higher education budget in 1986 was 1.3%.

In addition to the allocation from the Government higher education budget, STOU has its own revenue from the operations of the university. More of this theme has been discussed in ES 317.

Conclusions

STOU has made considerable progress since its establishment in 1978, despite many initial constraints. It has become evident that STOU cannot manage solely on the government budget, but has to rely on its own revenue from student fees.

STOU is concerned about maintaining a high standard for its course materials, and has developed a system of feedback to allow for the revision of course if and when necessary. The course team system has resulted in courses materials of high quality, and is one of STOU's innovations. STOU's distance education methods would appear to be reasonably effective, judging by the success achieved by STOU graduates in gaining admission to graduate schools. There has also been a high degree of acceptance by the public of STOU's degrees and its instructional materials. However, the continued success of STOU as a distance education institution depends on the maintenance of the high quality of its materials and of its support services.