

# THE DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY IN MASS SOCIETY

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The concept that has influenced the provision of education in Thailand during the last decade is that of lifelong education, according to which, education is considered to be an essential factor in human existence. It is a process and a chain of activities in which man is involved throughout his life. The provision of education in accordance with this concept is intended to meet the needs of society and individuals, regardless of sex or age. Consequently, there have been attempts to search for appropriate patterns of providing education at various levels, in conformity with the lifelong education principle. The new form and structure of providing higher education, which has been introduced and which is of great interest to countries throughout the world, is the open distance education system.

In the past decade many countries in Asia have extended the range of educational opportunities by adopting the open education system, and setting up, for this purpose, higher educational institutions of distance learning. Pakistan's Allama Iqbal Open University, Sri Lanka's Open University, China's Central Broadcasting and TV University, Australia's Deakin University, Japan's Broadcasting University, Korea's Junior College of Air and Correspondence, and Thailand's Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (referred to as STOU hereafter). All these institutions of distance learning, despite their individual characteristics, do indeed have one aim in common: to serve the needs of adults seeking to upgrade their professional qualifications, and/or to acquire a real understanding of the subjects chosen. At present, a large number of countries in Asia, especially

those in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, have expressed a great interest in providing higher education through distance learning systems. It is expected that distance learning institutions similar to these under review will be established in many countries in the near future.

In Thailand, during the last decade, attempts have been made to broaden opportunities for higher education, by increasing the number of regional universities, setting up an open admissions university, and welcoming the private sector's participation in establishing private colleges. All these efforts failed to meet the needs of the people and society as planned, especially those of working adults who wish to have access to higher education to improve the quality of life and professional competence, in a rapidly changing country in the process of accelerated development, such as Thailand.

The idea of setting up a distance learning university received earnest support from the Thai Government in 1976 when the Office of University Affairs appointed a Planning Committee to formulate an Open University Project with the author as Chairman. During the planning stage, several questions arose: Why was it necessary to set up a distance learning university? Would the distance learning university really be able to maintain the same quality and academic standards as those of conventional universities? Would it be worthwhile to invest in this type of university? Would there be much educational wastage as a result? But the most important question was: Would the Thai people be favourably disposed to the distance learning system since they have been accustomed to the classroom system all along? Clear and definite answers to all these questions were needed at the time.

The Planning Committee not only had the difficult task of setting up the administrative and academic structure of the Open University with a distance learning system, but it also had to collect and analyse all the relevant information and data for the decision-making authorities concerned, in order to dispel doubts, convince them of the desirability of setting up such a university, and gain support from the general public. Accordingly, during the project planning phase, several precautionary measures were taken to ensure a greater degree of success: a survey was made of the educational needs of the general public; tests were given

to academics of various universities to verify the efficacy of the distance learning concepts and techniques; a background study was conducted into the structure and organization of existing distance learning universities in various countries; and a survey was also taken of existing infrastructures favourable to the provision of this type of education, for instance, such facilities as the postal service and radio and television networks. Eventually, the Planning Committee fulfilled its assigned task, and the project was submitted to the Government for approval. On September 5, 1978, the Open University was created by Royal Charter under the name of "Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University," to become the first distance learning university in Thailand and in Southeast Asia.

Though officially established, the Open University was still not in a position to admit students immediately. It needed some two years of preparation before having its first student intake. Once again, the author was entrusted with another important task—that of being the rector of this brand-new university and of translating plan into reality. The first two years of operation were spent on making preparations to enable the University to operate in reality rather than merely on paper. The main tasks undertaken were those of organization, recruitment and development of personnel, and provision of funds and facilities. During the preparatory phase for the first student intake, the main question was whether to start admitting students before the University had a permanent home, or to defer admission until the completion of the University's headquarters, which was expected to be in 1984. The first alternative was chosen in order to test the feasibility of making common use of existing resources. Consequently, the first enrollment took place in December 1980 when a total of some 82,000 students were registered in three schools—Educational Studies, Management Science, and Liberal Arts. The figure was 7 times higher than the original estimate. Nevertheless, with a view to being open in the full sense of the word at the outset, the University admitted all those students without exception. For the 1981-82 academic year enrollment has risen to approximately 150,000, and the number of Schools has expanded to eight. The five new Schools are Health Science, Law, Economics, Home Economics, and Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives.

The University does not have its own classrooms, but relies instead on an integrated media approach in combination with a network of regional and local study centers. The main media are printed texts, textbooks, workbooks, and radio and television broadcast handbooks. The support media are radio and television broadcasts, including video-tapes and course materials recorded on cassette tapes. The various regional and local study centers provide tutorial and counselling sessions, as well as other study facilities for students throughout the country.

In view of the fact that the author represents an institution of distance learning whose status has just changed from that of "intending doer" to that of "beginner," it seems appropriate that he confine himself to presenting such problems as have emerged from the limited scope of experience acquired so far. Altogether there are some six critical problems to be highlighted.

*The first is: why is it necessary to provide higher education through the distance learning system?*

In developing countries, opportunities for education in the traditional system are somewhat limited. Since the level of economic and social development of a society is closely related to its stock of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills, both productive and social, it is essential to have a teaching mode that will enable a vast majority of working people to have access to education on a more extensive and egalitarian basis without having to stay away from their jobs to attend classes. The distance learning system can thus be seen as an effective and economical means of extending educational opportunities.

*The second point is: for whom is distance learning intended?*

Developing countries in Asia must try to satisfy the rapidly increasing demands for education of both adults and secondary school-leavers. The establishment of an Open University will serve two main purposes: to enable adults to undertake university studies, and to ensure the availability of places for young adults fresh from secondary schools. For an Open University such as STOU, to provide educational services for these two target populations—so diverse in maturity, background, lifestyle and motivation—by means of the same teaching mode, will inevitably constitute a complex problem. Whereas the occupational groups are content with an external studies system that allows them to continue their normal occupations, the young adult groups, hav-

ing been accustomed to face-to-face teaching and being still unemployed, would naturally prefer to be internal students in conventional universities. If it were possible to make a choice free of any kind of political pressure, it would greatly facilitate the operation of an Open University to have an intake of working adults only. However, if no alternative were made available, what would happen as a result?

*The third point is: how are we to set up an appropriate distance learning system?*

At the beginning of our project, we tried to look for a satisfactory blueprint or a successful precedent to follow by studying the development and achievements of such universities as the U.K. Open University, and learning from their long experience in teaching at a distance. After several study and observation tours to various regions of the world, we have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to adopt and imitate any existing model, and that each institution must devise its own distinctive system, well-suited to the socio-economic environment of the country.

In developing countries, mass communication technology has not as yet attained the desirable degree of progress. As the use of radio and television in particular is still limited, greater reliance has to be placed on correspondence methods than on other media. Since local educational services are scarce and not easily accessible, it is necessary to supplement independent learning with the provision of a greater number of tutorials, and opportunities for traveling staff/student contacts.

Another problem relates to publications in foreign languages such as English. As the mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction in many countries, it is virtually impossible to make use of the existing teaching materials in conjunction with other open universities in developed countries. Hence, there is an increase in the responsibilities that must be borne. Admittedly, this problem can partly be solved by translations, but, on the whole, the production and development of self-instructional materials will still have to be undertaken. As far as the exchange of teaching materials among distance learning institutions is concerned, possibilities of realization are somewhat limited. What can readily be achieved instead, is in the field of technical know-how rather than in that of teaching materials.

*The fourth point is: how are we to maintain high-quality teaching and prevent a lowering of standards?*

Many academics, especially those of conventional universities, and employers who have been accustomed to the traditional educational practice, tend to doubt whether it is possible to teach at a distance effectively, and claim that the distance learning system is likely to turn out graduates of lower quality than those produced by conventional universities. It is true that some open universities such as the U.K. Open University, have proved that it is possible to provide education of high quality similar to that of conventional universities. In developing countries, however, an open university has to face constraints of various kinds, such as those previously mentioned. The question is how to convince the public of the effectiveness of teaching at a distance, and to win respectability for such a new venture rapidly?

*The fifth point is: how are we to avoid wastage without producing an overabundance of graduates, or how can we avoid the wastage vs. surplus dilemma?*

The dilemma faced by most open universities is that, on the one hand, there is a high drop-out rate and that, on the other, there is a surplus of graduates, exceeding the demand for them. Educational economists tend to criticize investment in distance teaching by pointing out that the wastage rate in open universities is higher than in conventional universities. At the same time, if open universities can teach effectively, there is a concomitant fear that there will be an overabundance of graduates, because the intake of students will be greater than that at conventional institutions of higher education. On the other hand, if a university is really open in the full sense of the word, then the opportunities for education offered to the community at large will be unlimited. So how is one to strike a balance between social demand and manpower requirements?

*The sixth and last point is: what is the key to success?*

The provision of higher education through the distance learning system owes its success or failure to the personnel available, especially academic staff. In developing countries, there is already a shortage of well-qualified staff in conventional universities. With the establishment of another university, the staff shortage problem becomes more serious and selection even more restricted. In the case of an open university, even if the greatest care has

been taken in recruiting really well-qualified staff, there is still the problem of re-orientating them from the traditional educational practice with which they have been acquainted. Indeed, it is a most difficult task to transform them into enthusiasts for, and experts in, the new system. It is not an exaggeration to say that distance learning has revolutionized higher education, which used to be considered as a "sacred rite practised behind closed doors" for centuries. Academics involved in the distance learning system will therefore be required to have exceptional courage and skills. One of the most important tasks that an open university in developing countries has to undertake from the outset is that of creating new attitudes and values. In other words, academics should undergo a kind of conversion of the soul, to become a new breed of academics favourably disposed to the distance learning system. Such a task is indeed most strenuous and demanding.

If the development of personnel is the key to success, then co-operation among institutions of distance learning should be in the form of sharing resources and expertise, so as to enrich the teaching staff's knowledge and experience, and provide them with new technical know-how. This is something on which great emphasis should be placed. To have high-quality distance learning, teachers are undoubtedly the key to success.

The author would like to conclude by stating that the distance learning system is an innovation that will facilitate the democratization of higher education in mass society. It is easy to say this, but difficult to put it into practice. Nevertheless, hard as it may seem, you will agree that it is both a mission that we have to accomplish, and a challenge that we have to accept.