

THE ROLE OF SUKHOTHAI THAMMATHIRAT OPEN UNIVERSITY IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Wichit Srisa-an^{1/}

ABSTRACT

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University aims to improve the quality of life and expand educational opportunities for people throughout the country. Through a system of distance-teaching/learning which features printed materials, radio and television broadcasts, and tutorials, the University offers a variety of degree and non-degree programmes-many of which are geared to improving living standards in rural areas. The School of Home Economics seeks to improve nutrition, living quarters, and child-rearing practices, while the School of Health Science is preparing nurses, health workers, and health administrations for work in rural areas. To assist in economic development, the School of Economics is offering applied courses in agricultural and business economics, finance, and banking; and the School of Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives is disseminating knowledge about co-operative formation. Programmes to improve the performance of local police are offered by the School of Law, and training for village leaders is being planned by the School of Political Science. In offering students throughout the country a variety of relevant courses, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University is playing and will continue to play an important role in rural development.

In order to meet the increasing demands for higher education, particularly among the rural popular, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University was created by Royal Charter in September 1978. The major mission of the University is to improve the quality of life of the people generally by raising the level of knowledge of working people and expanding the educational opportunities for secondary school graduates. The University's distance-teaching/learning system is particularly appropriate for furthering the government's plan to develop the less privileged rural areas. Through the use of various media, in particular, printed texts, cassette tapes, radio and television broadcasts, the University is able to reach students in even the remotest parts of the country. Rural residents who would find it virtually impossible to attend a conventional university are able to study on their own without having to enter an actual classroom or leave their normal occupations.

In carrying out its mission of bringing higher education to the farthest reaches of the nation, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU for short) has laid down the following objectives:

- 1) to provide and promote university and professional education so as to enable the people to raise their level of education in response to the needs of society;
- 2) to promote research so as to generate new knowledge which can be applied to national development;
- 3) to render public service to society by disseminating knowledge so as to promote personal development and professional competence; and
- 4) to preserve and further national culture.

STOU offers both degree and non-degree programmes. The types of courses and study areas offered are based on the needs of the community and their compatibility with the University's distance-teaching system. STOU does not follow the traditional practice of organizing a university into faculties and departments; rather it has established major study areas or schools, each school, each having a board of studies of its own. Courses are presently offered in the following study areas:

^{1/} Professor and Rector, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1) Educational Studies | 6) Economics |
| 2) Management Science | 7) Home Economics |
| 3) Liberal arts | 8) Agricultural Extension
and Co-operatives |
| 4) Health Science | |
| 5) Law | |

STOU admitted its first batch of students in 1980, the total was 82,139 including 68 Buddhist monks. Current enrollment is 111,311. Students come from every province in the country, and a majority are from outside the central region.

Since STOU provides only home-based study and uses educational media to impart instruction, the staff required is smaller than that in other universities. The University thus has only the necessary personnel to provide academic and support services and seek assistance in the preparation of materials from experts attached to outside bodies and staff members of other universities.

The University does not have its own classrooms, relying instead on its regional and local study centers to provide tutorials and other study facilities for students in various parts of the country. Employing distance-teaching techniques, STOU uses the following media to impart instruction:

- 1) main media: printed texts, textbooks, workbooks, radio and television broadcast handbooks, etc;
- 2) support media: radio and television broadcasts including video-tapes and course materials recorded on cassette tapes; and
- 3) tutorial and counselling sessions at various regional and local study centers.

A brief description will now be given as to how several of the study areas are specifically carrying out the University's mission of upgrading the quality of life of the rural populace.

Home Economic The School of Home Economics, in preparing its students to help in the development of the rural areas, has divided its curriculum into two general areas: Community Nutrition and Child and Family Development. Within these two broad areas, the School is concentrating on the following topics:

- 1) Preventing nutritional problems and improving the health of every member of the family;
- 2) Improving the living quarters so that they are more comfortable and sanitary;
- 3) Improving the care of infants, children, and teen-agers so as to ensure their physical, emotional, and behavioral well-being and
- 4) Improving the management of family resources.

The School is also planning to inaugurate a mobile nutrition unit which will work with home economics students in various local areas to improve nutritional practices and living conditions and increase family income.

Health Science The major emphasis of the School of Health Science is on training nurses, health workers, and health administrators for work in rural areas. This is in accord with a 1979 study which indicated the pressing need for such personnel. STOU thus seeks to reverse the historical tendency of Thai training institutions to produce health manpower for the urban areas, which has led to a physician/population ratio of 1/1,000 in Bangkok, 1/30,000 in smaller municipalities, and only 1/150,000 in the rural areas. In fact, 75 percent of all other health workers are in Bangkok, while 85 percent of the population live in rural areas.

STOU instituted its Health Management Programme in 1982, admitting approximately 4,000 students (eight times the target enrollment). Programmes for nurses and public health workers will be offered in 1983, and plans call for the education of 1,800 nurses, 1,000 senior health workers, and 500 health administrators by 1986.

ECONOMICS The School of Economics likewise seeks better the living conditions of people in the rural areas, recognizing their importance in the economic development and security of the country. Not only do the rural areas supply foodstuffs and manpower, but they also serve as major markets for agricultural and industrial products and as important sources of capital formation and savings.

In July 1982 the School admitted its first group of students (1,500) in the 4-year bachelor's degree programme. Courses in applied economics such as business economics, agricultural economics, cooperatives, finance, money and banking, and public economics are vital to the country's economic and social development and crucial in bettering living conditions in remote rural areas.

The School of Economics seeks to equip people in rural areas to participate more fully in various stages of development projects. Economics can play a vital role in such specific areas as benefit and cost analysis, project evaluation and feasibility studies, planning strategies, and resource allocation and distribution.

AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION AND CO-OPERATIVES

The School of Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives aims to develop personnel of the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives, particularly regarding agricultural extension and co-operative formation. In training Ministry employees, the School seeks to ensure that co-operatives become farmers' institutions set up in a legal manner so that they can contribute to increased productivity, higher income, and a generally better life for the farmers.

The co-operatives will give farmers the chance to buy factors of production such as fertilizer, insecticides, and tools, as well as daily living essentials, at lower-than-market prices. In addition, the co-operatives will assist the farmers in selling rice, fruits, and vegetables.

The School also hopes to enroll community development workers, public health workers, and others involved in rural development work, including substantial numbers of the farmers themselves so that all can better work together to improve living conditions in the rural areas.

LAW The School of Law has opened a four-year degree programme for police master sergeants throughout the country. The expected outcome is a general upgrading of their performance and an improvement in rapport between police and rural resident.

POLITICAL SCIENCE The School of Political Science is planning to work with the Department of Local Administration in improving the performance of village headmen and leaders of groups of villages. Certificate courses and possibly a degree programme are being contemplated.

The above courses and programmes illustrate some of the ways that the University is striving to fulfill its mission of improving the quality of life and expanding educational opportunities for all segments of society. In opening avenues of education to villagers, in providing courses appropriate to local needs, and in working to upgrade the performance of relevant government officials, STOU is making—and will continue to make—a substantial contribution to rural development.
