The Management and Economics of Distance Education: The Case of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

Wichit Srisa-an and Tong-in Wangsotorn

Abstract

This paper focuses on the managerial skills required to run an open university and the economic aspects of such an operation. It is a case study of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) and reflects the current problem in Thailand which is to seek effective and economical ways of responding to the needs of and demands for more widespread access to higher education.

The fundamental concept of open education would seem to pose enormous problems, both in terms of economics and management. At STOU the distance teaching/learning system (DTL) was selected as the most appropriate vehicle to convey education to more of the people – to a much greater part of the population – in the attempt to overcome these two specific problems

The first section of the paper, Part I, provides details of admission and the arrangement of the courses followed by a description of the degree programs offered by STOU's 10 schools, including available majors and the specific titles of the degrees Certificate programs and joint programs with other agencies are also described.

Consideration of the students themselves is also introduced in the first section. Data on the new student intake is examined, and an analysis of the information about them and their success in graduation is provided.

Part II takes up the theme of management in distance education. The first section, in essence, deals with the academic and administrative structure and refers to the organization structure. This comprises the governing bodies – the University Council and the Academic

Senate — together with their duties and responsibilities, role and function; the support units, such as the Offices, and the academic units — the schools, their chairmen, boards of studies, and academic assessors.

The second section of Part II deals more specifically with management per se. The discussion of the system functions and supportive units provides a broad overview of the operational mechanics from admission to examinations and graduation. The management of the materials production process established at STOU exemplifies the success of the planning, implementation, and management of the STOU system.

Part III emphasizes the economic aspects of distance education at STOU and compares these with other institutions. A general accounting of institutional costs and the cost to the individual and society are also covered

PART I BACKGROUND OF THE UNIVERSITY

1. Background

The idea of establishing an open university arose from the desire to democratize higher education and from the stimulus provided by the concept of life-long education. The increasing demand for higher education led the Royal Thai Government to look for ways of responding to this demand effectively and economically.

The distance teaching/learning system was viewed as a practical means of supplementing the conventional university system. Given existing financial constraints, an open education system using distance teaching methods was considered to be the most appropriate alternative.

After three years of planning, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) was established by Royal Charter in September 1978. It was the first open university in Southeast Asia to employ a distance teaching/learning system to extend higher education to the people. Like other conventional state universities, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University is under the guidance of the Ministry of University Affairs, enjoys a great degree of autonomy, and has the right to award its own degrees.

2. Programs

2.1 Degree Programs
Eligible for enrolment as students in the degree program, without entrance examination, are:
    (a)   those who have completed upper secondary schooling (12 years) or its equivalent;

(b) those who have completed lower secondary schooling (10 years), who have had 5 years of work experience after receiving their certificates, and who are over 20 years of age as of the 1st of July of the enrolment year;

(c) holders of diplomas or degrees at any level, or their equivalent, from institutions of higher education as approved by the STOU Academic Senate.

STOU employs a two-semester system and allows students to earn a degree in 4 - 12 years Courses are arranged in blocks to provide an integrated study of interrelated subjects Each block is worth 6 credits The number of credits needed for a bachelor's degree is from 132 to 144.

The degree programs offered by STOU are shown in the following table:

Table 1: Degree Programs by Major

School/Program/Major	Degree
1. School of Liberal Arts Provides foundation courses for other Schools.	
2. School of Educational Studies	
2.1 Four-Year Program	
(1) Elementary Education	B. Ed.(El.Ed.)
(2) Secondary Education	B. Ed.(Sec.Ed.)
2.2 Two-Year Program	
(1) Elementary Education	B. Ed.(El.Ed.)
(2) Secondary Education	B. Ed.(Sec.Ed.)
(3) Educational Administration	B. Ed.(Ed.Ad.)
3. School of Management Science	
3.1 Four-Year Program General Management	B.B.A. (General Management)
3.2 Two-Year Program	
(1) General Management	B.B.A. (General Management)
(2) Construction Management	B.B.A. (Construction Management)
4. School of Law	
4.1 Four-Year Program Law	LL. B.
4.2 Three-Year Program Law	LL. B.
5. School of Economics	
5.1 Four-Year Program Economics	B. Econ.
5.2 Three-Year Program Economics	B. Econ.

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Table 1 (Cont.)

School/Program/Major	Degree
6. School of Health Science	
6.1 Four-Year Program	
(1) Health Management	B.P.H. (Health Management)
(2) Public Health	B.P.H.
(3) Nursing	B.N.
7. School of Home Economics	
7.1 Four-Year Program	
(1) Community Nutrition	B. HE.
(2) Child and Family Development	B. HE.
8. School of Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives	
8.1 Four-Year Program	
(1) Agricultural Extension	B. AgExt. Coop.
(2) Co-operatives	B. AgExt Coop.
8.2 Two-Year Program	
(1) Agricultural Extension	B. AgExt. Coop.
(2) Co-operatives	B. AgExt. Coop.
9. School of Political Science	
9.1 Four-Year Program	
(1) Political Theories and Techniques	B.A. in Pol.Sc.
(2) International Relations and Comparative Politics	B.A. in Pol.Sc.
10 School of Communication Arts	
10.1 Four-Year Program Communication Arts	B. Comm.Arts
10.2 Three-Year Program Communication Arts	B. Comm.Arts

2.2 Certificate Program

The University has co-operated with various agencies in setting up short courses and programs for personnel development for the respective agencies, using the distance teaching/learning system. At present, the University offers the following certificate programs:

(1) Certificate in Basic Home Economics   1 year
(2) Certificate in Land and Property Law   2 years

(3) Certificate in Village Administration	1 year
(4) Diploma in Government Administration	1 year
(5) Certificate in English for Specific Professions	1 year
(6) Certificate in Teaching	1 year
(7) Certificate in Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives	1 year

2.3 Certificate of Achievement Program

Besides offering courses in the various Schools to students in degree and certificate programs, STOU also offers courses to students in a non-degree program. This is called the Certificate of Achievement program. Students are allowed to study one course per semester. The University allows them to take any course without stipulating any background requirements whatsoever

Students in this program use exactly the same materials and sit for the same examination as regular students. Upon successfully completing a particular course, they will receive a Certificate of Achievement for that course.

A special feature of this program is that it makes university courses available to anybody who wants to study. No educational qualifications are required to enrol in the program Candidates need only be literate. Thus the program is popular with adult working people seeking personal and professional development. Anyone can enrol as a student in the course while he or she is employed. By using multi-media, the program can manage a large number of students throughout the country. At the end of academic year 1983, 5,298 students had enrolled in this program.

2.4 Associate Student Program

This is a joint-program with other agencies which aims at the career development of working people. Students in this program, called associate students, take courses in the same way as regular students but do not pursue a degree. They receive only grade reports at the end of the semester. At present, the University has this joint-program with the Bangkok Bank and the Bank of Agriculture and Co-operatives. In 1985, about 1,651 employees of the Bank of Agriculture and Co-operatives and 30 from Bangkok Bank enrolled in the program.

3. Students and Graduates

3.1 New Students

Since its inception, STOU has enrolled about 360,000 students. In academic year 1985, the University admitted a new intake of 83,456 students. The three most popular schools were the School of Management Science, the School of Educational Studies, and the School of Law. About 75 percent of the new intake was enrolled in these three schools, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 : Distribution of New Students by School

School	1980-1981 Number	1982 Number	1983 Number	1984 Number	1985 * Number
1. Management Science	6,805	16,225	11,163	23,839	25,263
	(8.3)	(23.32)	(22 28)	(28.03)	(30.27)
2. Educational Studies	75,334	10,328	12,063	20,421	17,310
	(91.7)	(14.85)	(24 07)	(24 01)	(20.74)
3 Law	—	29,827	14,913	18,792	16,201
	—	(42.88)	(29.76)	(22.10)	(19.41)
4. Home Economics	—	2,287	2,353	3,006	3,976
	—	(3.29)	(4.70)	(3.53)	(4.77)
5. Communication Arts	—	—	—	4,102	5,585
	—	—	—	(4.83)	(6.69)
6. Political Science	—	—	3,731	4,688	4,118
	—	—	(7.45)	(5.51)	(4.94)
7. Health Science	—	3,985	2,061	4,401	4,743
	—	(5.73)	(4.11)	(5 18)	(5.68)
8. Liberal Arts	—	—	—	—	948
	—	—	—	—	(1.14)
9. Economics	—	1,553	1,932	2,786	1,938
	—	(2.23)	(3 86)	(3.28)	(2.32)
10. Agricultural Extension And Co-operatives	—	5,356	1,896	3,006	3,374
	—	(7.70)	(3.78)	(3.53)	(4 04)
Total	82,139	69,561	50,112	85,041	83,456
	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)	(100.00)

* As of June 20, 1985

3.2 Total Enrolments

Enrolments in each semester vary. Normally the number of students enrolled in the first semester is greater than in the second. In the first semester of academic year 1985, there were 173,350 students, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Enrolment by School — First Semester, 1985 ·

School	Number	Percentage
1. Management Science	46,689	26.93
2. Educational Studies	41,125	23.72
3. Law	41,274	23.81
4. Home Economics	6,874	3.97
5. Communication Arts	7,628	4.40
6. Political Science	7,761	4.47
7. Health Science	10,100	5.83
8. Liberal Arts	948	0.55
9. Economics	3,934	2.27
10. Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives	7,017	4.05
Total	173,350	100

* As of June 20, 1985

3 3 Graduates

In 1982, students in the two-year programs admitted for the first time in 1980 - 1981 comprised the first batch of graduates There were 9,594 graduates in this year In 1983, there were 17,236 graduates from four Schools: Educational Studies, Management Science, Home Economics, and Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives In 1984, there were about 11,000 graduates from these four Schools and the Schools of Law and Health Science Table 4 shows the numbers of graduates from the first and second batches of students

Table 4 : Numbers of Graduates — First and Second Batches

School/Program	1982		1983	
	Number	%	Number	%
Educational Studies	8,217	85 65	14,527	84 28
Elementary Education	3,026	31.54	6,604	38 31
Secondary Education	2,640	27.52	3,551	20 60
Educational Administration	2,551	26.59	4,372	25 37
Management Science	1,377	14 35	1,956	11 35
Construction Management	1,377	14.35	1,076	6 24
Business Administration	—	—	880	5 11
Home Economics	—	—	250	1 45
Community Nutrition	—	—	250	1 45
Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives	—	—	503	2 92
Agricultural Extension	—	—	481	2 79
Co-operatives	—	— `	22	0 13
Total	9,594	100.00	17,236	100.00

PART II THE MANAGEMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

1. Organizational Structure

1.1 Governing Bodies

1 1 1   The University Council
        The University Council is the supreme governing body of the University. As stipulated in the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University Act B.E. 2521 (1978), the University Council consists of the following members

The Chairman of the University Council to be appointed by the King

Ex Officio Members
— The Permanent Secretary of State for University Affairs or representative
— The Director—General of the Post and Telegraph Department or representative
— The Director of the Mass Communications Organization of Thailand or representative
— The General Manager of the Communications Authority of Thailand or representative
— The Rector of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

Academic Member
Representative of the Academic Senate of the University elected by the Academic Senate

Distinguished Members
Not less than four but not more than nine distinguished outsiders to be appointed by the King

The University Council elects one member as vice-chairman. The Council, upon the advice of the Rector, appoints a Vice-Rector as secretary.

The University Council has the following powers and duties:

        (1) to establish the policy of the University relating to education, research, public service, and cultural preservation;
        (2) to issue rules and regulations of the University,
        (3) to approve the granting and conferring of degrees, diplomas, and certificates;
        (4) to consider the establishment, dissolution, merger, and abolition of the offices, institutes, schools, as the case may be;
        (5) to approve the affiliation of higher education institutions;

(6) to consider the appointment and dismissal of the Rector and professors,

(7) to approve the appointment and dismissal of Vice-Rectors, directors of institutes, directors of offices, deputy-directors of institutes, deputy-directors of institutes, deputy-directors of offices, associate professors, and assistant professors,

(8) to issue rules relating to finance and properties of the University,

(9) to appoint a committee to carry out any matter as entrusted to it by the University Council, and

(10) to carry out other duties relating to University affairs which have not been specifically entrusted to any particular person.

1 1.2   The Academic Senate

The Academic Senate is the internal body responsible for the academic affairs of the University. Members consist of the following:

Chairman
The Rector is the Chairman of the Academic Senate.

Ex Officio
− Chairman, School of Home Economics
− Chairman, School of Law
− Chairman, School of Communication Arts
− Chairman, School of Political Science
− Chairman, School of Management Science
− Chairman, School of Health Science
− Chairman, School of Liberal Arts
− Chairman, School of Educational Studies
− Chairman, School of Economics
− Chairman, School of Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives
− Director, Office of Educational Technology
− Director, Office of Educational Services
− Director, Office of Academic Affairs
− Director, Office of Registration, Records, and Evaluation
− Director, Office of the University Press
− Director, Office of Documentation and Information

Academic staff members holding the rank of professor are also ex-officio members of the Academic Senate.

Elected Members
The following members are elected by the academic staff of each school. They hold office for a term of two years but may be re-elected.

  − Representative, School of Home Economics
  − Representative, School of Law
  − Representative, School of Communication Arts
  − Representative, School of Political Science
  − Representative, School of Management Science
  − Representative, School of Health Science
  − Representative, School of Liberal Arts
  − Representative, School of Educational Studies
  − Representative, School of Economics
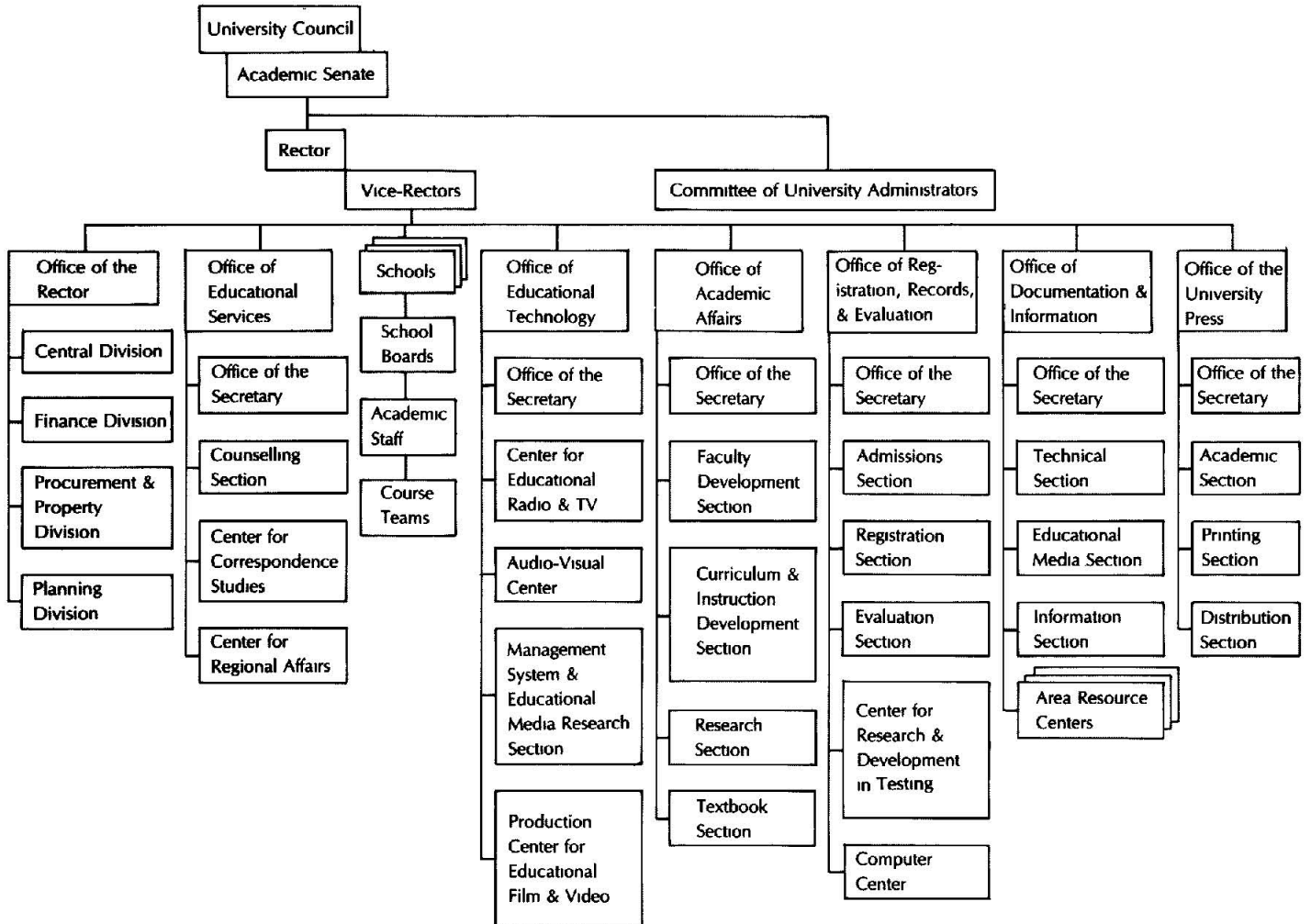 − Representative, School of Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives

Secretary

The Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs serves as the Secretary of the Senate.

The Academic Senate has the following powers and duties:

(1) to consider and prescribe curricula, teaching, and evaluation;

(2) to propose the granting and conferring of degrees, diplomas, and certificates;

(3) to propose the establishment, merger, and abolition of institutes, offices, and schools;

(4) to consider the affiliation of higher education institutions;

(5) to propose the appointment of distinguished members of the University Council;

(6) to consider the appointment and dismissal of professors, associate professors, and assistant professors,

(7) to find ways and means to improve and develop the teaching, research, and public services of the University;

(8) to advise the University Council on academic matters; and

(9) to appoint a committee to carry out any matter as entrusted to it by the Senate.

The University Council and the Academic Senate are the governing bodies of the University as indicated in Chart 1. Whereas these two governing bodies are typical in higher education institutions in many other countries, in Thailand, STOU is the only university to have an Academic Senate. Having two governing bodies facilitates decision-making. The University Council is concerned with general policy-making while the Senate is more concerned with curriculum and instruction. The appointment of course team committees, which is unique to distance education, is effectively made by the Academic Senate.

Chart 1: ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY

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                          University Council
                          
                          Academic Senate
                          
                              Rector
                              
              Vice-Rectors              Committee of University Administrators
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Office of the Rector	Office of Educational Services	Schools	Office of Educational Technology	Office of Academic Affairs	Office of Registration, Records, & Evaluation	Office of Documentation & Information	Office of the University Press
Central Division	Office of the Secretary	School Boards	Office of the Secretary	Office of the Secretary	Office of the Secretary	Office of the Secretary	Office of the Secretary
Finance Division	Counselling Section	Academic Staff	Center for Educational Radio & TV	Faculty Development Section	Admissions Section	Technical Section	Academic Section
Procurement & Property Division	Center for Correspondence Studies	Course Teams	Audio-Visual Center	Curriculum & Instruction Development Section	Registration Section	Educational Media Section	Printing Section
Planning Division	Center for Regional Affairs		Management System & Educational Media Research Section		Evaluation Section	Information Section	Distribution Section
				Research Section	Center for Research & Development in Testing	Area Resource Centers	
			Production Center for Educational Film & Video	Textbook Section	Computer Center		

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1.2 Supportive Units

There are at present seven offices providing administrative and technical support for the operation of the University They are:

(1) Office of the Rector
(2) Office of Educational Services
(3) Office of Educational Technology
(4) Office of Academic Affairs
(5) Office of Registration, Records, and Evaluation
(6) Office of the University Press
(7) Office of Documentation and Information

The responsibilities and duties of these offices are as follows:

(1) The Office of the Rector is responsible for record-keeping, public relations, buildings and grounds, finance, personnel administration, planning, and the purchase and maintenance of supplies.

(2) The Office of Educational Services is responsible for providing educational and vocational counselling and guidance to students, organizing tutorials, sending educational materials to students, and co-ordinating STOU study centers throughout the country

(3) The Office of Educational Technology is responsible for producing supporting media such as radio and television programs, films, audiotapes and videotapes.

(4) The Office of Academic Affairs is responsible for administrative and academic work assigned to it by the Academic Senate and the board of each school. It is also responsible for supporting research of the academic staff, translating and selecting books and texts for printing and distribution, and setting up staff training programs.

(5) The Office of Registration, Records, and Evaluation is responsible for admitting students, registration, keeping student records, supervising examinations, conducting research, and developing test instruments

(6) The Office of the University Press is responsible for all types of printed matter, including books, texts, and workbooks.

(7) The Office of Documentation and Information is responsible for providing books and documents for staff and students, providing educational materials for STOU Corners, and co-ordinating Area Resource Centers throughout the country.

1.3 Academic Units

STOU does not follow the traditional practice of organizing into faculties and departments. Rather it consists of major study areas or schools. Each school has a board of

studies, consisting of the chairman of the school and 3 - 7 members elected by the full-time staff of that school. The chairman and the board members hold office for four years. Each board of studies is in charge of all the academic and administrative matters of the school as well as other assignments entrusted to it by the University Council or the Academic Senate. At present STOU has 10 schools·

(1) School of Home Economics
(2) School of Law
(3) School of Communication Arts
(4) School of Political Science
(5) School of Management Science
(6) School of Health Science
(7) School of Liberal Arts
(8) School of Educational Studies
(9) School of Economics
(10) School of Agricultural Extension and Co-operatives

STOU also has a project to establish a School of Science and Technology in the Sixth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1987 - 1991).

By organizing the University into schools and having 3 - 7 board members, STOU realizes the following advantages:

(1) The dividing line between schools is reduced by promoting teamwork and close collaboration among staff members. This kind of co-operation is very important for the Open University.

(2) Decisions can be made quicker since decision-making is facilitated by having a small number of board members.

(3) The board of studies is active since election is held every four years Having the election helps assure representation of academic staff interests in decision-making.

In addition to the board of studies each school has some 5 - 11 academic assessors to advise on academic standards, curriculum development, instruction, evaluation, and educational services.

Apart from their advisory capacity, academic assessors also serve as the University's external examiners.

Academic assessors are appointed from those considered outstanding in the academic community.

2. The Management

The management of distance education at STOU can be conceptualized as consisting of the following systems: admission and registration, production, delivery, instruction, examination, and administration. Table 5 illustrates system functions and support units to carry out the respective functions.

Table 5: System Functions and Support Units

Admission and Registration System	Office of Registration, Records, and Evaluation — admitting students — registration — record-keeping
Production System	Office of Academic Affairs — preparing manuscripts for course teams — providing training for outside writers — organizing workshops for course writers Office of Educational Technology — producing radio programs — producing television programs — preparing films, audiotapes, and videotapes Office of the University Press — printing textbooks and workbooks — printing examination papers
Delivery System	Office of Educational Services — sending materials to students
Instruction System	Office of Educational Services — organizing tutorials — co-ordinating study centers — providing counselling and guidance — co-ordinating student clubs and associations Office of Academic Affairs — organizing professional experience workshops — organizing enrichment programs for graduates Office of Documentation and Information — sending materials to STOU corners — providing library services to students — co-ordinating resource centers

Table 5 (Cont.)

Examination System	Office of Registration, Records, and Evaluation — supervising exams — developing test instruments — organizing workshops for exam writers
Administration System	Office of the Rector — record-keeping — public relations — finance — personnel — planning and development — materials and supplies

2 1 Admission and Registration System

STOU admits students once a year. Normally the University opens for admission from January to April Information and application forms are made available from January to March During the period February to April, prospective students fill in application forms and mail them to the University Enclosed together with their applications are postal money orders for tuition fees and course materials Those who meet admission requirements are admitted without entrance examination.

2.2 Production System

Courses offered by STOU are arranged in blocks to provide an integrated study of interrelated subjects Each course block is worth 6 credits. A student must take at least 1 course (6 credits) but not more than 3 courses (18 credits) per semester A four-year program leading to a bachelor's degree requires 22 - 24 courses (132 to 144 credits)

Since opening, STOU has produced 243 new courses. The number of new courses produced for each semester is presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Number of New Courses Produced between 1980 - 1985

Academic Year	1st Semester	2nd Semester	Total
1980 - 1981	9	12	21
1982	22	30	52
1983	23	33	56
1984	29	35	64
1985	21	29	50
All totals	104	139	243

To produce course materials, STOU uses a team approach by setting up a course team As of 1985, STOU had appointed 243 such course teams to produce course materials

The course team consists of five categories of specialist·
(1) subject or content specialists (not more than 7 persons)
(2) media specialist
(3) evaluation specialist
(4) editor
(5) secretary

Course team members may be assigned additional tasks as editor or secretary. Experts from outside organizations and staff members of other universities whose academic achievements are outstanding are invited to be course team members and co-writers. About 1,000 qualified outsiders have served as course producers STOU organizes an intensive workshop for them before they start writing course materials

There are two important components in the infrastructure of the production system: one is the Educational Broadcasting Production Center and the other is the Office of the University Press.

The Educational Broadcasting Production Center, donated by the Government of Japan, is equipped with modern production equipment. The construction started in December 1982 and was completed in February 1984. The Center comprises three television program production studios and six radio program production studios together with a wide variety of other useful facilities. It is capable of producing approximately 10,000 radio programs and 2,000 television programs per year.

The Office of the University Press is the other important element in the infrastructure for the production of printed materials. The University is using its own revenue for the construction of the building — 5,169 square meters — and the provision of printing machines.

*APPENDIX 7: PERMANENT ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF**

Office	Educational Level			Total
	Associate or lower	Master's degree	Bachelor's degree	
1. Office of Registration, Records, and Evaluation	49	7	21	77
2. Office of Educational Technology	85	29	62	176
3. Office of Educational Services	27	10	22	59
4. Office of Academic Affairs	45	6	21	72
5. Office of the Rector	57	4	42	103
Total	263	56	168	487

* As of June 30, 1985