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# The Distance Teaching University: The Case of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University

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One concept that has strongly influenced the provision of education 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 this 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 developing countries, human resource development is of crucial importance. Such development not only increases the quantity of trained manpower in response to national needs, but it also improves the quality of life and work for people generally. As human resources are developed, rising expectations are engendered in the people for further education. But opportunities for education at the highest level are limited because resources are limited. Under these conditions of scarcity, inequality of educational opportunities naturally arises. Such inequality can be erased only by efforts to democratize education. Thus various models and methods must be explored to make higher education truly education for the masses. But it is essential that these approaches be economical and efficient so as not to exceed limited resources.

One approach used to expand educational opportunities is regionalization, the establishment of universities in different geographical regions of the country. A second approach is to establish a multicampus university system. Here campuses of a single university are located in centers of population in various parts of the country. A third approach is to provide extension or extra-mural studies. A fourth approach is to establish institutions of the community college variety.

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This paper has been presented at international conferences on five occasions and has been included in the following publications:

1. Neil, Michael W. [Ed], *Education of Adults at a Distance: A Report of the Open University's Tenth Anniversary International Conference*, London: Kogan Page 1981, pp. 23 – 27.
2. Seoul National University, *Universities in Mass Society*, Seoul National University Press, 1983, pp. 169 – 175.
3. Gellor, Jaime M. et. al. [Ed], *Readings on New Thrusts in Education*, Manila: Ministry of Education and Culture, 1984, pp. 157 – 162.
4. The University of the Philippines, *Alternative Educational Future*, Quezon City: Phoenix Publishing House, 1985, pp. 126 – 133.

In order to update the data, some minor changes have been made in the paper for this publication. However the substance of the paper remains unchanged.

But these four approaches, even though they expand educational opportunities considerably, still do not completely solve the problem of inequality. This is particularly true in an agricultural society such as Thailand's where fully 85 percent of the people live in rural towns and villages. The four approaches simply cannot reach out to all these local areas to provide true equality of educational opportunity for all the people.

In Thailand attempts have been made during the last decade to broaden opportunities for higher education by increasing the number of regional universities, setting up an open admissions university, and by 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 wished to have access to higher education to improve their quality of life and professional competence in a rapidly changing country in the process of accelerated development such as Thailand.

Given this state of affairs, a distance education model has been used in Thailand at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (referred to as STOU hereafter) as an alternative to the other four methods. Democratization of higher education can be more fully achieved using this model in that education is brought directly into the home. Integrated university-level courses are provided in order to upgrade working adults in the public and private sectors and to afford high school graduates who live in rural areas the chance to work and study at the same time. Courses are also made available to those who simply want to further their knowledge without enrolling in a degree or certificate program. Knowledge is thus disseminated to the people at large.

The university does not have its own classrooms, but relies instead on a multi-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 broadcasts, including videotapes and course materials recorded on audio-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.

This is truly a program which reaches out to every corner of the nation, offers students a home-based education, and helps improve the quality of life and work for more and more people.

The idea of setting up a distance teaching university in Thailand 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 favorably 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 analyze 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 of the educational needs of the general public, tests with the academics of various universities to verify the efficacy of the distance teaching concepts and techniques, a background study into the structure and organization of existing distance teaching universities in various countries, and a survey of existing infrastructures favorable

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 teaching 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 its first student admissions. Once again, the author was entrusted with another important task – that of being the rector of this brand-new university and of translating this plan into reality. The first two years of operation were spent in making preparations for enabling the university to operate in reality rather than merely on paper. The main task undertaken was that of organization, recruitment and development of personnel, making provision for funds and facilities, and curriculum development and instructional design. During the preparatory phase for the first student admissions, 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 use of existing resources to the utmost. Consequently, the first enrollment took place in December 1980 when a total of some 82,000 students were registered in two schools – Educational Studies and Management Science. This figure was seven times higher than the original estimate. Nevertheless, with a view to being open in the fullest sense of the word at the outset, the university admitted all those students without exception. For the 1981-1985 academic years, enrollments rose to approximately 370,000 and the number of schools increased to ten. The ten schools are Liberal Arts, Educational Studies, Management Science, Health Science, Law, Economics, Home Economics, Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives, Political Science, and Communication Arts.

In the initial stages of its development, STOU has concentrated on its teaching and service functions. In the teaching area, STOU now provides bachelor's degrees programs and has up to this year conferred degrees on three classes of graduates totalling 38,318.

In its service capacity, the university has stressed the provision of continuing education for the general public. This has been achieved chiefly in three ways. First, the university has established a certificate-of-achievement program which sets no limits whatsoever on enrollment. Students in this program study the same integrated courses and sit for the same exams as do regular degree students. If they pass they exam for a particular course, they receive a certificate of achievement. To date, there have been eight such enrollments and a total of approximately 9,000 participants registered.

Second, the university has set up in-service training courses with governmental and private agencies in accord with the training needs of each respective agency. In this manner the entire distance teaching system is used in the implementation of inservice training. One such program has been established in cooperation with the Police Department to provide training in the law for non-commissioned police officers. Another program has been set up with the Department of Lands to provide training for the Department's officials. A third program has been established in cooperation with the Department of Local Administration to provide administrative training for subdistrict chiefs and village headmen. A fourth program, offered in cooperation with the Community Development Department, aims at the nationwide training of women in such areas as home economics, family management, health, and vocational skills.

Third, the university has extensively used broadcast media to disseminate knowledge and information to the people throughout the country. Over 150 radio programs, each 20 minutes long,

are broadcast weekly, totalling 7,800 radio programs per year. Each week some 21 television programs, each 30 minutes long, are broadcast, totalling 1,100 programs per year. It is estimated that about five million people, students and members of the general public, watch and listen to these programs.

In view of the fact that the author represents an institution of distance teaching whose status could still be classified as "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 one 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 such distance learning intended?

Developing countries in Asia have to try to satisfy the rapidly increasing demands for education for 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, life-style, 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, having been accustomed to face-to-face teaching and being still unemployed, would naturally prefer to be internal students in conventional universities.

In fact, in the past two years that STOU has admitted fresh secondary school graduates, the number of applicants has been approximately 6,000 – less than 10 percent of the total applicants each year. Therefore, even though the university is open to both working adults and secondary school-leavers, it is clear that distance education is more popular with the former group, and we expect this trend to continue.

The third point is: How are we to set up an appropriate distance teaching and 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 socioeconomic 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 printed materials than on electronic 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 travelling 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, the possibilities of such 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.

We have been able to achieve respectability so far in essentially three ways. First, we have included outstanding academics as well as acknowledged leaders from other agencies in virtually all our activities. They have served as planners, curriculum developers, part-time course team members, materials producers, and tutors at supplemental instructional sessions. Fully two-thirds of those engaged in such activities are from outside STOU. They in effect serve as external examiners as well, for in addition to producing course materials, they also write examination questions.

Second, we have gone through the accreditation process with various accrediting agencies from our inception. We were thus able to achieve accreditation before graduating our first batch of students.

Third, our respectability has been enhanced by the quality of our instructional materials, especially our textbooks. There has been a general lack of Thai-language texts, and we have helped to overcome this deficiency. We have produced texts in many different areas, and many of these are being used by other universities. This has helped us to achieve rapid recognition.

The fifth point is: How are we to avoid wastage without producing an overabundance of graduates, or how can we avoid the wastage-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 over-abundance 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?

Our recent experience with enrollment statistics seems to indicate that the problem of unemployed graduates may not be a serious concern. For, as mentioned earlier, less than 10 percent of the applicants are fresh high school graduates. The rest are working adults who do not wish to separate work from study. Thus it appears that we are concentrating more on in-service education for those already working than on preservice training for those who have yet to enter the work force. And we have every reason to believe that this trend will continue. Thus the problem of unemployment may not arise at all; or, if it does, it will affect a relatively small proportion of the students.

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 the 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 reorienting 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 teaching has revolutionized higher education, which used to be considered as a "sacred rite practised behind closed doors" for centuries. Academics involved in the distance teaching 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 favorably disposed to the distance teaching system. Such a task is indeed most strenuous and demanding.

If the development of personnel is the key to success, then cooperation among institutions of distance teaching 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 teaching and learning, teachers are undoubtedly the key to success.

The author would like to conclude by stating that the distance teaching and 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 into practice. Nevertheless, hard as it may seem, you all will agree that it is both a mission that we have to accomplish and a challenge that we have to accept.